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THE LUCKYBUG LODE

BY

ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

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FRONTISPIECE BY

EDWARD C. CASWELL

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CHAPTER I.

JUSTICE AT SONTAG.

THERE are those who perhaps will contend that Jeremy Painter should not have entered Klondyke John's saloon, with his money in his pocket, on payday night. These will say that he should have gone straight home to his bride of a week and placed the five precious gold pieces in her keeping. But he did go into Klondyke John's; and the results were that he lost his money and his bride, became one of the men who can't come back, brought about the discovery of the Luckybug Lode, and made the story of his life worth telling.

Klondyke John's was crowded that night. It was payday for most of the men who worked in the woods and at the stamp mills which were responsible for the rough-and-ready border town of Sontag. The long bar was lined with the bibulous. Short-skirted girls, highly painted—for those days—danced with heavy-footed woodsmen and mining men, and lured them into spending their money for drink or at the gaming tables. Smoke wreaths hung horizontally. The fumes of whisky filled the room. The place was hideous with noise. It made a typical border scene.

Jeremy Painter was an axman, engaged in cutting fuel wood for the stamp mill of the Laura Gold Mines Company. His pay was two dollars and a half a day. Paid monthly, the sum that was in his pocket amounted to exactly sixty-five dollars, for he had lost not a single day. He was twenty-one years of age, a husky youngster, good-looking, good-natured, snub-nosed, and liked by those at Sontag who knew him intimately.

The week before, he had married Ellen Wilder, daughter of a tunnel foreman of the company for which he worked. Ellen was nineteen. The young couple had been given as bridal presents enough furniture for them to start up housekeeping. The company furnished a cabin for them free of rent. Just the same, Jeremy needed that sixty-five dollars badly.

Still, as had been his custom since drifting as a tramp into Sontag from the Kansas town where he was born, he entered Klondyke John's on payday night. He feared, for one thing, that his old friends would ridicule him for not joining in the regular monthly festivities of the camp as theretofore. They had ridiculed him enough already for marrying Ellen, though any one of them would have done the same had the lithe girl looked upon him with favor. But marriages were few and far between at Sontag, for the simple reason that it was principally a one-sex town. Jeremy did not want his old associates to think that he had turned over a new leaf, or anything like that, or that he had given up his liberty when he married the foreman's daughter.

The bully of Sontag was in Klondyke John's that

night. In fact, he was usually in Klondyke John's. Soddy was his name. He was a big, lazy, ham-fisted hobo who for the past two years had made Sontag his headquarters, wandering far on occasion, but always coming back. There had been hold-ups at Sontag many times, and it had been whispered that "Quapaw" Soddy might be able to throw a light on the matter if subjected to the third degree. He seldom worked, at any rate, but ordinarily was in funds.

Quapaw Soddy stood the fourth man from Jeremy as he bought a round of drinks for his comrades of the pine woods. Four rounds were all that the boy indulged in then. For, when an opening offered, he slipped away and hastened into the zigzag trail that led up the mountainside to the little two-room cabin where Ellen awaited him.

When halfway home he swung about a gigantic boulder which caused the trail to sharply curve, and next instant a six-gun was pressed against his stomach and the growled command came startlingly:

"Up! Get 'em up!"

The young woodsman promptly raised his hands. There was no help for that. Searching fingers went through his pockets, while the muzzle of the big gun still threatened his middle; and what remained of his sixty-five-dollar payday went into the keeping of the highwayman.

"Keep 'em up and walk on," came the second order; and there seemed nothing else for Jeremy to do.

The moon was rising. Its thin, pale light had showed the victim that the hold-up man was large

in size. A handkerchief mask had covered his face. But Jeremy Painter knew, as well as he knew the way to the little cabin on the mountainside, that the hold-up man was Quapaw Soddy.

He stopped presently, lowered his hands. Nothing happened, so he turned and let his furious glance coast backward along the trail. He saw no movement.

Trembling seized him. He sat down on a stone to ease the strain on his quaking legs. He slapped his felt hat on the ground and twined his fingers in his hair. He twisted and pulled till the roots ached. He ground his teeth in helpless rage. It was with difficulty that he restrained hot tears of anger, for his boyhood days were just behind him.

What should he do? A fine story to tell the girl he had married only the week before! Her father had not been any too enthusiastic about the union, anyway, and had predicted that his daughter would starve before the year was out. He did not know that the girl herself had much confidence in him. He didn't know, even, that she loved him with the single devotion that he craved. He had begged her for nearly a year to marry him, and she had put him off repeatedly with one excuse or another. Then, halfway to pique another admirer who had given her up as hopeless and gone after another girl, she had consented. The ceremony had been performed before she had time to reconsider.

There was one thing certain: with all of these elements of the situation before his mind, Jeremy could not go home to Ellen and tell her he had been held up and his payday taken away from him.

Another thing was certain, too: he could not prove that Quapaw Soddy had been the hold-up man. However, he knew as well as he knew anything that no other had committed the act of highway robbery. What he knew and what he could prove were different things.

He rose suddenly to his feet, drifted down the mountainside. He came to a cluster of dark shacks at the foot of the grim old peak. One of these, after making sure that no one was within, he entered through a window, since the door was locked.

In this cabin lived a comrade of the woods crew, Andy Wales by name. Inside, Jeremy found Andy's chest of oak and lifted the lid without a sound. Fumbling about, he found what he was after, pocketed it, and climbed outside once more, closing the window after him.

Ten minutes later he presented himself again in Klondyke John's.

He sidled to the bar and waited for somebody to ask him to have a drink. The revel was progressing, and a man might get drunk in John's place now without one cent in his pockets.

One man was spending freely. And this individual was Quapaw Soddy. Round after round he bought for his intimate friends. Jeremy ground his teeth when he thought of whose money was paying for these drinks.

Then suddenly Quapaw looked along the bar and spied him. An insolent, triumphant look came into his little eyes, and he shouted loudly:

"Why, hello, there, bridegroom! Stick your snoot

in the trough. Here, bartender—give the lucky bridegroom a drink on me!"

A loud laugh followed, indulged in by Quapaw and his comrades. The bartender thumped a glass across the bar toward Jeremy. The bottle followed.

With a hand that slightly shook, Jeremy Painter filled the glass to the brim, raised it, and looked along the bar into the staring eyes of Quapaw.

"Here's lookin' at you, Quapaw!" he toasted, and drained his glass.

He remained at Klondyke John's three hours more, wandering from game to game, from the bar to the billiard tables, now and then accepting a drink when one was "on the house," or when some flush-faced spendthrift called the revelers to the bar *en masse*. But he kept his eye on Quapaw, who was becoming very drunk.

At last, about two o'clock in the morning, Quapaw staggered out into the cold mountain night, alone. A minute afterward Jeremy was following.

Outside, he ran with all his might over a circuitous route through town. He came out in a moonlit gully and hid behind a scraggly pine. He tied his handkerchief over his mouth and nose.

Ten minutes later Quapaw Soddy came reeling toward him, muttering to himself. Then Jeremy, his heart in his teeth, stepped out, pressed the revolver that he had borrowed to the bully's ribs, and ordered him to elevate his hands.

For a little the drunken man was so stunned by the unexpected happening that he failed to respond. Jeremy jammed the six-shooter into his stomach and repeated his command.

"Do it," he gritted, "or I'll kill you where you stand!"

Then slowly the big fellow's ham-like hands went up, and Jeremy went through his pockets.

He took what he could find—silver and several gold pieces. He dared not risk counting out his sixty-five dollars even had the moonlit sky been light enough for him to see. And to take only what had been stolen from him, returning the remainder to Quapaw's pocket, would have been to let the thief know who had held him up. Jeremy did not want him to know, for that would only mean more trouble later on. This was not an act of vengeance. He simply wanted—had to have, he felt, because of his young wife—the money that he had earned in the woods the month before. So he took what he had found and shoved it into his pocket, not knowing the amount.

Then he prodded the man again and ordered him on. He waited until Quapaw had stumbled drunkenly out of his range of vision, when he hurried to the cabin of Andy Wales to replace the borrowed weapon. Wales had been playing faro in Klondyke John's when he left the place.

He listened at the cabin door, but heard no sound. Once more he crept in through the window. He felt about through the darkness for the chest, found it. He raised the lid, and as he was removing the six-shooter from his pocket the door creaked open. Two men, one of them carrying a lantern, stood, startled, on the threshold. One was Andy Wales, and the other was Jimmy Keister, the youth whom Ellen had hoped to spite by marrying Jeremy.

"Well, what's this?" Andy wanted to know, as he saw the six-shooter drop from his friend's hand on top of some clothing in the chest. "Not mistakin' anything in this cabin for yours, are you, Painter?"

Jeremy grinned uncomfortably. His friend had never called him by his surname until now. "I—I——" he stammered.

"Yes, I know all about that!" sneered Wales.

"I was just borrowin' your gun, Andy," pleaded Jeremy. "The—the dam' cats've been keepin' me awake here o' nights, and I was gettin' tired of it."

"Why didn't ye ast me for th' gat?"—so coldly that Jeremy shook in his shoes.

"I couldn't find you," was his unfortunate explanation. "I didn't think ye'd care, Andy."

"Oh, ye didn't, didn't ye! Well, we'll see about that! Get outa here, now. You're a dam' poor liar. I saw ye in Klondyke John's to-night, and you saw me. You coulda ast me for the six-gun then. Ye was tryin' to swipe it. Hit th' grade now, you dam' thief, and if I ever ketch ye in my things again——"

Next morning, at ten o'clock, Jeremy Painter was arrested in the woods by the sheriff from the county seat, charged with highway robbery. Gold and silver were discovered on his person in the amount of a hundred and thirteen dollars. His wife, when asked, claimed that Jeremy had never owned such an amount of money since she had known him, and that they had been entirely without funds for the past half-month. Andy Wales had told the sheriff of the episode in his cabin in the early morning hours. It was plain to see, now, he had stated, that Jeremy

had borrowed the six-shooter for the hold-up, and had been returning it instead of trying to steal it when discovered bending over his chest. Jimmy Keister, Ellen's cast-off suitor, had corroborated Andy's story. And Quapaw Soddy had told the sheriff that, drunk though he was, he had instantly recognized Jeremy as the man who had held him up.

Jeremy Painter was taken to the county seat and tried for highway robbery. He was found guilty as charged, and an intolerant judge sentenced him to forty years in the penitentiary. Hold-ups had been entirely too frequent of late at Sontag, he stated in pronouncing sentence, and he meant to make an example of the prisoner before the bar, who doubtless was responsible for all of them.

Even Ellen's brown eyes blazed wrathfully and disdainfully at Jeremy as the deputy sheriff led him from the courtroom to his cell.

CHAPTER II.

THE PRISON CAMP.

In the course of time Jeremy Painter, now known as Prisoner Number 7809, was paroled by reason of good behavior. It was not a full parole that had been granted him, for he was still virtually in custody. But with nineteen of his fellow convicts he was transferred to a prison camp, the occupants of which were working on the State highway. At any rate, he breathed the odors of the great outdoors and felt a sense of freedom that the great gray walls had denied him for the past ten years.

Only twice had he heard from Sontag during the long period of his incarceration.

The first time occurred when he was notified that his wife had secured a divorce on the grounds of his having been convicted of felony.

The second time was when a man whom he had known slightly in the mining camp reached the prison to serve out a sentence for manslaughter in another county. He had contrived, through the secret methods invented by convicts, to give Jeremy a little information.

But as Jeremy was not greatly interested in happenings at Sontag, having been only a floater when he paused there to go to work, there was but one piece of news that interested him. This was that he was the father of a daughter about nine years old

who had been named Nelita, and who was known generally to Sontag as Nell. Also that her mother had married again. Her new husband was Jimmy Keister, the youth whom she had tried to spite by marrying Jeremy, and who had been one of the important witnesses for the prosecution at his trial.

The child bore the surname of Keister, and Jeremy's informant thought that perhaps she did not know that Keister was not her natural father.

The knowledge that Ellen had married Keister had not given the convict many hours of grief. Ellen had turned squarely against him in his hour of need, and he had all but expelled her from his thoughts. But the information that he was the father of a nine-year-old daughter named Nelita furnished him with food for contemplation during many sleepless nights.

What was she like, this nine-year-old Nelita Painter—for, of course, he refused to think of her under the name of Keister? Would she ever learn the truth about her father? Were Ellen and Keister kind to her? Did Ellen hold a grudge against her because she was the daughter of the man she had never really loved? Did Keister treat her as he would treat a child of his own? The knowledge that she bore her step-father's name offered some hope that she was being treated well. Still, he worried about her and longed to see her. Would this ever come about?

The sergeant in charge of discipline at the prison camp was an original and a kindly man. He had been considered hard-boiled when a guard at the prison, but he changed his bearing toward the

"honor" men under him when he took charge of the road camp. His name was Patrick Doble.

One day, at the noon hour, he had the men before him and gave them a long serious talk. He told them that he wanted them to have as much pleasure in life as it was possible for him to give them. And then he asked for suggestions as to what might be done with their spare hours to make their existence happier and more profitable.

A man spoke up at once—an aged prospector who was serving time for highgrading in a gold mine. He stated that the remote country in which they worked showed signs of gold, and, for his part, he asked to be allowed to pan the creeks and find out if any valuable deposits might be near.

The others received the suggestion with ready enthusiasm. What man doesn't dream of finding gold! Few of them knew anything about the art of prospecting, but all were willing to try.

So it came about that when work was over for the day the paroled convicts hurried to the many streams and dry cañons that were in the vicinity of their daily efforts, and panned furiously, all dreaming dreams of great riches in the immediate future, to be kept a secret and hoarded until the day that they were free.

It was two months after the beginning of this pastime—for such it turned out to be in every case save one—that the old prospector held a whispered conversation with Number 7809 one chilly night. He and Jeremy had talked often together, for these two alone had mining experience. Jeremy, it was true, knew very little about gold deposits, but what

he had picked up at Sontag gave him something with which to hold up his end of conversations with the grizzled veteran. And the old man liked him.

"Boy," he whispered, "I think I've struck it. For over a month I been followin' up certain leads in a certain branch cañon up above, and the signs look good. There's a mother lode, and a rich one, somewhere in th' hills above us. It may take months to find her; it may take a day. Maybe a year, seein' I got such a short time to work at it. Come with me to-morrow evenin' and I'll show ye what I've found. It's th' richest float I seen in all my years o' prospectin'. But keep it dark, boy—not a word! Jest you an' me—savvy?"

"Sure, sure," Jeremy whispered back. "But why me?"

"I like ye, kid," the old fellow made answer. "Ye been kind to me, even though I'm an old man an' outa date. I can't say th' same for some more of 'em. And I'm thinkin', kid, that I ain't never gonta realize on this find, if she turns out right. I'm eighty-seven, and I see somethin' that I can't dodge starin' me in th' face. I got nobody—not a child, not a relative that ever cared for me or that I care for. She's yours, kid, providin' I cash in before I get outa this confounded camp. Keep it dark, young fella—not a word! It may mean everything to ye one o' these fine days."

It was two weeks later, and just before the camp was to be moved to a new location, which move probably would put an end to the inmates' prospecting, that the old man and Jeremy bent over a ledge of

rock high up in the hills. Dusk was nigh, and soon they must hurry back to camp.

They had been picking steadily, far under the ledge, and Jeremy had just crawled to the surface with something in his hand that gleamed in the fading light.

The old man's breath rasped in his throat as he clutched the glittering lump of quartz.

"God!" he breathed. "My God, boy, she's rich! If they's anything of a vein at all—millions."

They covered up their work carefully and left scarce a sign of toil behind them as they hastened down the slope toward camp.

"Not a word, kid! Keep it dark!" husked the old man again. "We're made, both of us. You, at any rate. I'll never see th' sunlight on that gold, maybe. But I've had th' fun—I've had th' fun. Since I was twenty years of age, till they penned me up, I worked for what ye seen to-day. I've seen it—I reckon that'll have to be enough for me. But you! Boy, ye're made!"

They fancifully decided, dreaming of a glorious future later, to call the rich deposit "The Luckybug Lode," because of the countless little swimming insects of that name that covered the surface of a pool in the creek below the ledge.

A month or more afterward the old man did not respond one morning when the convicts were aroused for their duties of the day. He lay stiff and immovable, his faded eyes staring up at the tent-top, a smile of achievement on his corrugated lips.

And ten days afterward Jeremy Painter did the most foolish thing of his life. The gold craze was on

him. He believed that, if he were free, he could become a wealthy man and defy the law. Money would buy him off, he argued, if he were taken again. So one cloudy night he slipped away and became a wanderer once more, though this time a fugitive from the law.

But a fellow convict called "Jumbo" John knew something that Jeremy thought was his own well-guarded secret, now that the old prospector had passed into the great beyond. Jumbo John had helped to carry the dead man from the sleeping tent, and under his mattress he had found and pocketed a lump of gleaming quartz.

And wrapped about the gold sample had been a piece of dirty paper, on which the childish old man had scribbled again and again "The Luckybug. The Luckybug."

Jumbo John had watched the old man and Jeremy, knowing that they were friendly, knowing that, of all the convicts in the camp, the old fellow alone had experience in prospecting. He had suspected something when the attitude of the two toward seeking gold had seemed less fervid just before the camp had moved.

And every day, now, Jumbo was expecting to be granted full parole, when he could leave the prison camp and strike out for himself in the world, still under surveillance, but free to go and come and follow out his destiny so long as he lived up to the letter of the law.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN WITH THE BLACK HAT.

For Jeremy Painter there followed a long period of aimless wanderings, of hurried escapes from the hounds of the law, of life in hobo camps from one end to the other of the West. It was not long after his escape that Jeremy realized he had committed the most foolish act of his life by running away. He had been paroled, placed on his honor. A pardon would have been forthcoming in ten years more, he believed, even though he had no friend to intercede for him. But in the heat of a thoughtless moment, goaded on by the gold frenzy, he had taken the irrevocable step.

And now he was no nearer to realizing his dream than he had been when working in the prison camp.

Finally, in a border town one day, he was arrested in a "jungle" camp with a number of other tramps. Believing that when the keen-eyed detectives gave him the "once-over" they might, by reason of information and photographs sent out, recognize in him a wanted man, he put up an unexpected and desperate fight and gained his liberty.

It was after this that he gave up dodging the authorities in the United States and crossed the line into Mexico.

A wild career ensued. He punched cattle below the border, mined, railroaded, followed construction

work, conducted a *cantina*, became an expert gambler and a deadly shot with a six-shooter; and the year of 1919 found him a notorious and picturesque character, and a man of means.

He had won seven thousand dollars in a poker game one night from a well-to-do railroad contractor whose outfit was at work below the line. And this money had formed the nucleus of his prosperity. He had journeyed to the City of Puerta de Luna and opened a resort and gambling dive, furnished it picturesquely, and settled down to amass a fortune. And, reminiscent over that lost treasure in the solemn hills six hundred miles above the line, he named the place "The Luckybug." By degrees he himself became known to the frequenters and habitués of his dive as Luckybug. The fictitious name that he had given on entering Puerta de Luna was forgotten, even by himself almost. For him, then, there was no surname. He was Luckybug to all, and nobody knew him by any other title. And his fame spread far, even into the United States.

One day in 1925 a stranger came into The Luckybug—apparently an American—and stood before the bar, requesting a drink of cognac. Americans were rather scarce in Puerta de Luna, and the native bartenders studied this man curiously. Luckybug himself was not in the main barroom at the time.

He was a Western-looking person. He was tall and bony and his face was cadaverous. His hair was black and heavy. He wore a wide-brimmed black Stetson, but otherwise his clothes did not smack of the cattle ranges, for he wore a plain business

suit which, though not well pressed, was none the less expensive.

He took several drinks, and chatted with Pedro, one of the bartenders, who had a fair command of English.

Two days later he appeared again, and this time Luckybug chanced into the barroom while he was there.

The black eyes flashed a look at the proprietor. Instantly they were averted. But Pedro watched. Pedro had every reason to be watchful of strangers in Puerto de Luna, for it was a town where anything might happen, and Pedro himself had been a bandit in his day and was suspicious of everybody. The stranger sipped his cognac with seemingly simple pleasure and unconcern; but four times, while he stood there, Pedro caught the black eyes roving to the figure of his boss.

Luckybug had returned to his suite of rooms in the rear end of the old adobe building before the stranger took his leave that afternoon.

He was seated there, deep in a book. It was a modern work of a scientific nature, a book that many people would have been surprised to find in this man's hands. Yet he read it avidly.

The adobe walls of the old *cantina*, a century and a half in age, were two feet thick. Luckybug had had this portion of the interior paneled in mahogany, and gold-leaf decorations gleamed against the dark, rich, polished surface of the beautiful wood. Rugs from Persia, India, and Turkey covered the floor, antique weaves that had cost their owner several thousands. Oriental drapes of the purest silk hung

at the queer old windows. Original oils and water-colors were on the walls—and there were not too many of them—which were mostly landscapes by well-known artists of the West and Southwest. The furnishings of his individual apartment had been shipped to him direct from New York City, and a person of taste and discrimination, a New Yorker who had summered in Mexico, had selected them for him.

But few people knew of this luxurious suite in the rambling old building, for Luckybug cherished it. It represented himself as he alone knew himself, and he kept it all but a secret. A few people whom he knew, however, were eligible to entrance, and these were far above the ordinary. Even the people who worked for him, aside from the wrinkled old housekeeper, had only glimpsed this strange interior when they were obliged to come to the door on business matters with the boss.

The building was in the shape of a hollow square. A *patio*, with an aged fountain in the center, was completely surrounded by the old adobe structure, which filled a city block. Here were shade and color and coolness and a breeze that murmured softly in the fronds of stately palms, and gaudy peacocks proudly strutting. Here were stone seats and modern hammocks, for the guests of the *fonda* were allowed the freedom of the court, where Luckybug wished them to be comfortable. No room in the building—and there were forty of them—opened into another save those which formed the owner's private suite. For his own convenience he had cut connecting doors in the thick partitions that separ-

ated these. But to go from any other room of the house to another, one must cross the shadowy court, with its flagstone floor where moss and grasses grew between the slabs.

The Luckybug, both the hotel part and the saloon and gambling rooms, had been considerably modernized by its present owner. No other building in Puerta de Luna had electric lights, for Luckybug owned the only lighting plant, private or public, in the town. But his new ideas had not ruined the charm of the ancient structure.

All this because Jeremy Painter came of a good family in the Middle West, a family that were not strangers to good books and the niceties of civilization. Though his schooling had been incomplete before he ran away from home and drifted to the town of Sontag, he could not have been considered uneducated. And since those days he had read extensively, and had studied life and nature.

There came a tap on the oaken door, and Luckybug rose to his feet to answer it.

Pedro stood there, and his employer leaned through the opening to hear what he had to say.

"Thees *extranjero*—what you call heem, boss?"

"Stranger," interpreted Luckybug.

"Ah, yes, boss. Thees stranger he ees funny. He comes once, twice. He asks about thees *cantina* always. He ees ver' interest', boss. His eyes—his so black eyes—they fall on you, once, twice, three times to-day. I no like those looks."

"The tall, lank American with the black Stetson hat, Pedro?"

"He ees describe'," quaintly answered the Mexi-

can. "Those man ees funny. I say to you, boss: Watch those man. He has business in thees *cantina* which ees not to sip the cognac."

"Well, you watch him if he comes again, Pedro. And when he shows up, send Isabelita or one of the other girls to tell me. I'll have a look at him myself. Is he stopping here?"

"Those things I cannot tell," said Pedro—which meant that he did not know whether the black-eyed stranger was a guest at the hotel which occupied two angles of Luckybug's property, and was managed by a Mexican landlord on a percentage basis. "But those things I shall discover now," he added.

"Do that, Pedro," Luckybug told him. "And let me know at once."

Pedro was back in ten minutes. "He ees of the *fonda*," was his report to Luckybug. "The best room ees his, and he ees serve with the meals brought up on the tray."

"You got his name?"

"Of a sureness, boss. It here ees written down by the Señor Alvarado." And he handed Luckybug a piece of paper.

The owner read:

Conrad Gaslyn, Las Vegas, New Mexico, U.S.A.

"What does he seem to be doing here in Puerta de Luna, Pedro?" asked Luckybug, looking up thoughtfully.

Pedro shrugged expressively. "*Quien sabe!*"

"Find out," commanded his employer. "Put a spy on him. It's just as well to watch strange

Americans in Puerta de Luna, particularly when they are alone and seem to have no business."

"Abrahán shall see," the bartender promised, and shuffled off across the sun-flecked *patio*.

Abrahán was a hanger-on of the *cantina*, another fugitive from justice, it was believed—a dark, slippery, silent, skulking little native who would do anything for Luckybug, and who could do many things along the lines of the task which Pedro was to impose upon him.

Luckybug stood in the doorway, for no particular reason, and watched Pedro until he entered the main barroom. Dusk was close at hand, and the *patio* looked calm and peaceful under the lingering rays of the sun.

Then he heard the closing of a door on the other side of the court, and turned his eyes in that direction.

The tall dark man, with his black Stetson in his hand and the sunlight playing on his raven hair, was coming from the hotel, presumably for a stroll in the *patio*.

But to the surprise of Luckybug he walked straight toward him, past the sparkling fountain, and stopped when a few feet from where he stood in the doorway.

He bowed slightly. "You are called Luckybug, aren't you—you're the owner of this property?" he asked.

Luckybug inclined his head.

"May I come in? I'd like to have a word with you."

"I'm sorry," Luckybug told him, "but it's a pe-

culiarity of mine that I invite very few people into my private apartment, Mr. Gaslyn. However, I shall be glad to hear anything that you have to say in the *patio*."

"That will be good enough for me," returned the other.

"One moment, then," said Luckybug, and he stepped back into the room and examined the automatic pistol which he always carried, to make sure that it was ready for instant service.

Then he stepped out into the soft sunlight and found the stranger, seated on an old stone seat, awaiting him.

"You needn't have gone back for your gun, Luckybug," said the man a bit reproachfully. "You'll have no need for it, I assure you."

"I didn't go back for it," Luckybug told him frankly. "It was already in my pocket. I merely took the precaution to make sure that it was loaded and in order."

The stranger nodded. "I understand," he said. "But you have no occasion to fear me. It is true that I've come here to find out just who you are, but I mean you no harm. Frankly, then, I'm looking for a man named Jeremy Painter, and I have reason to believe that you are the man I want. How does that strike you? Do you feel like talking about the subject?"

CHAPTER IV.

CONRAD GASLYN, PRIVATE DETECTIVE.

No change whatever came over the face of the owner of The Luckybug when the stranger mentioned his name. His keen, kindly blue eyes looked fearlessly into the black eyes of the other man, and he deliberately took a seat beside him on the bench.

"You, I have been told, are Mr. Conrad Gaslyn, of Las Vegas, New Mexico," he said.

Mr. Gaslyn nodded.

"And your only business in Puerta de Luna is to find a man named Jeremy Painter?"

"That's just it, Luckybug."

"And may I ask why you pick on me? Do I resemble this man in any way?"

"That's hard to say," replied the other, "since I've never set eyes on Jeremy Painter. And it will be rather difficult for me to tell what I have to say unless you are willing to state at once whether or not you are the man I want to see."

Luckybug smiled. "This is a wild and woolly place, Mr. Gaslyn. We're a secretive bunch down here—particularly the Americans who live here. Some of them can't go back, you know. We don't pry into one another's pasts, naturally, for people who live in glass houses oughtn't to throw stones. So I scarcely feel like answering your question. If I am not involved—that is, if I am not the man you

want to see—maybe one of my friends is that man. And I think, on the whole, that you had better tell me your business with this Jeremy Painter before I say anything more. As I told you, Puerta de Luna is a secretive place. We're good people down here—but, well, odd."

"I find myself in something of the same position," declared Gaslyn, with a wry little smile. "I don't want to bring any trouble to the door of this Jeremy Painter. Therefore I hate to tell you what's on my chest for fear that, if you are not the man, he may get into difficulty because of what I've said."

"I see. We don't trust each other very thoroughly, do we? Well, that's only natural. This is a city of secrets and intrigues. Nobody really trusts anybody else. But suppose you tell me what you want with this Jeremy Painter. It's possible that I know the man, if he is in Puerta de Luna. It may be, even, that I am he. Or, suppose we go about it this way: Suppose you tell me why you think I may be this man. Surely you won't be obliged to disclose much in telling me that."

Again the dark man looked down at the old flagstones, turning his broad-brimmed black hat round and round between his knees, his forearms resting on his thighs. A peacock screeched across the court.

"I guess that's sensible talk," said Gaslyn at last. "So I'll tell you why I think it's possible that you are the man I want. It's simply this: because you're called Luckybug."

For all the schooling that the royal game of poker and being a wanted man had given him, Luckybug repressed a start with difficulty. Nobody on earth,

after the death of the old prospector who had discovered the rich lode up there in the Western states, should have known that they two had named the mine-to-be The Luckybug.

But in an instant the resort man was himself again. And, fortunately, the other had continued to gaze downward at the flagstones as he made the remarkable assertion.

"Luckybug," observed the owner of the sobriquet, "is a nickname that may have been given to a man for many reasons. I've been a gambler, Mr. Gaslyn. I'm a gambler yet, for all of that. Maybe I'm lucky at cards. This place"—and he swept an arm about the court—"is mine. And when I landed in Mexico I came on the bum, with not one red cent in my pockets. Yet I value this property at twenty thousand dollars, gold. Including the business, I value it at fifty thousand. My winnings as a gambler started it. Mightn't a man be nicknamed Luckybug in a case like that?"

Conrad Gaslyn nodded. "I had thought of that, of course," he said. "In fact, before I made this trip into Mexico, I happened to find out that you were a lucky gambler, and it pretty nearly kept me from risking the expense of the trip.

"But you're a blue-eyed gambler, and your hair is brown and curly. Also it looks to me as if, when you were a youngster, there may have been freckles on your nose. You're good-looking, I can vouch for that. And such a description was given me of Jeremy Painter at the age of twenty-one." He looked up slowly and studied his host. "You're a little portly now, of course."

Luckybug was coatless and wore white duck pants and expensive European shoes. A black string tie was under the attached collar of his white silk shirt. On one finger sparkled a five-carat blue-white diamond, his one conceit in personal adornment. The stranger scrutinized him approvingly.

"There is some one, Luckybug, who wants to find this Jeremy Painter very badly," the man proceeded, looking down absently again. "I may as well blurt out the truth, I guess. It's his daughter, who is now twenty years old, as pretty as God's hills and valleys, educated, refined, modern—far enough above the ordinary to be called remarkable. Her nam is Nelita Painter, and they call her mostly Nell. If you know of any man about forty-one years of age in Puerta de Luna who may strike you as being this Jeremy Painter, won't you tell him what I've just told you?"

The dark man looked up sharply. But Luckybug was prepared for just such tactics. He knew that the other had been pretending absorption, and that he would dart a glance at him when he thought that Luckybug was least expecting it. He found himself looking at a masklike face, expressionless but for the faint smile that curved the corners of the lips.

"That's interesting," Luckybug remarked, and in his tones was not a tremor. "How long has the young lady been looking for her father, may I ask?"

"For about six years," was the reply. "Up until she was fourteen she had been led to believe that her name was Nelita Keister. Then she learned the truth —that Keister was only her step-father—and she has

been searching for her true father ever since. Of course, for a long time her search was not systematic, since she was barely more than a child. But after she reached young womanhood she went at it on a larger scale, and she had financial backing, too. She is very anxious to find him, I can assure you. And for the past year, having been asked by her to help with the search, I have been something of an entomologist."

"I don't believe I quite understand that," Luckybug told him.

Mr. Gaslyn smiled. "An entomologist hunts insects, you know. I've been looking for luckybugs all over the country."

It was Luckybug's turn to sit in silence for a time. This thing had hit him hard, and, despite his outward cool demeanor, he was on fire within.

"Suppose," he said presently, "that a man like me —one engaged in the business that I have taken up —should turn out to be this young lady's father. Would she be anxious to claim him then?"

"I think that wouldn't matter greatly," replied Conrad Gaslyn. "It would depend a great deal, of course, on the fundamental character of the man. There are gamblers and gamblers, saloon men and saloon men, you know. And there are such things as mitigating circumstances in life. Taking it by and large, Luckybug, I should think that a gambler and resort man of your type wouldn't shock her greatly. She's a broad minded young woman."

"Well," Luckybug remarked, rising as if to terminate the interview, " I may have somebody in mind who fits your description of this long-lost father. I

will consider putting the matter up to him. I'll let you know. You're stopping here—how long?"

"Until I can make sure that you're not the Luckybug I'm after."

"Then I'll see you in a few days, Mr. Gaslyn—after I've decided whether or not the man I have in mind will resent my interference in his private affairs. Will you join me in a little drink in the *cantina?* You should drink as much as you can comfortably carry while you're down here, my friend. I often wonder what the United States is like since Prohibition came."

The laughter of Luckybug was light, but his heart was hammering wildly.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE WALNUT DRESSER.

Luckybug's legs were trembling as, the stranger having declined his hospitality, he walked away from him to the door of his living quarters. He had passed through many adventures, lived more experiences in his forty-one years of life than most men have lived at eighty, but never before had a situation struck him so hard as this one.

Inside, with the door closed between him and the rest of the world, he sank into a deep overstuffed chair and sat immovable, as completely stunned as if some one had struck him with a blackjack.

Nelita Painter! Nell!

Many times he had wished that he were like other men—normal. Many times had he thought of this daughter whom he had never seen. On countless occasions he had wondered if he would ever meet her, had speculated over what she would be like—had longed for her.

And now that the opportunity had come for him to see her, a cold chill ran down his spine. She was educated, refined, the man had said. He was a saloon man and a gambler, a notorious character, wanted by prison authorities in the United States. Could he face this girl and tell her that he was her father? Dared he do it?

"Luckybug!" The name struck him suddenly like a blow between the eyes.

How had Conrad Gaslyn been led to connect the name Luckybug with Jeremy Painter? Jeremy had taken the nickname because of the gold deposit up there in the United States—because he and the old prospector, dead now for eleven years, had chosen to call their prospective mine The Luckybug. Who knew of that besides himself?

But that some one did was certain. Luckybug scented a trap. Was somebody trying to inveigle him back into the United States, so that he would be arrested as an escaped convict? Did some one know about that secret gold find and wish to worm its location out of him? Maybe the girl was a decoy. Maybe she was not his daughter at all. He could find out the truth about that, he believed, if he could speak with her.

Where was she? He had neglected to ask Mr. Gaslyn that. And what was the connection between her and Gaslyn? Who had educated her? What ——?

But these questions brought no answers from the walls about him. Perhaps no one could satisfactorily answer them but the girl herself. What should he do? Ought he to see Gaslyn again and question him further? Or——

The questions that had been hammering in Luckybug's brain had occupied half an hour. He rose to his feet, fumbled for the electric light button, and flooded the dark room with radiance. Then he put on his hat and slipped out softly into the *patio*.

His footsteps making slight noise on the grass

lined flagstones, he crossed the *patio* to a door which led to the hotel office. He had decided suddenly to see Gaslyn again and ask him all the questions that had been tormenting him, even though this might convince the man that he actually was the forgotten Jeremy Painter.

The office of the *fonda*, he found, was empty. It was a large, dark, bare room, and nobody ever loafed in there. He stepped to the little desk and consulted the register. He discovered, on turning back two pages, that Conrad Gaslyn occupied Room 100, which was at the farther end of the hall on the floor above.

He rapidly ascended the ancient, groaning stairs.

The hall on the second floor, he found, was dimly lighted by a single electric bulb halfway of its length. Old Alvarado believed in saving expenses wherever possible, even though the gloom of the place should cause a guest to stub his toe. Luckybug hastened along the uncarpeted hallway, but before he had passed three doors there came, from the other end, the piercing sound of a woman's scream.

Women in Puerta de Luna were not treated as the darlings of the gods. It was no uncommon sight for Luckybug to see Mexican men beating their women in the streets, or wherever they chanced to come upon them in their misbehaviors, real or fancied. The scream of a woman undergoing punishment, therefore, was no new sound in the *fonda*. Be it said, however, that such situations had always been short-lived when Luckybug happened unexpectedly upon the scene; and there were many sore-headed natives of the male persuasion who had muttered dark

threats of vengeance in some remote period to come.

Perhaps this throng was now to be increased by one, for the noise had not died out before Luckybug was running for the door through which it had sounded, his automatic reversed in his grip and ready to descend upon the luckless skull of some jealous paramour.

He stopped running suddenly and waited, resting on his toes. He was not quite sure from which room the shriek had come. But as he stood there, listening intently, he heard low gurgling sounds, as of some one being choked. There was no mistaking the door through which these issued, and next instant he was twisting a knob immediately on his right.

The door was locked.

"What's going on in there?" shouted the owner of the property. "Come on—open up! I want to find out what's the trouble!"

There came no reply, so, with his ear to the key-hole, Luckybug listened intently.

Faintly to his ears came the sound of labored breathing, and it seemed as if the owner of the lungs that were responsible for it was trying his best to suppress it.

Luckybug stood erect again, stepped back to the middle of the hall, and lunged toward the door, one shoulder thrust forward as a battering-ram.

The single onslaught was sufficient to break the lock and send the old door swishing inward to describe a complete half-circle and crash against the wall. Luckybug himself was pitched, staggering, into the room, but he caught himself before he fell.

The room was in total darkness. He stood there, listening, waiting, while he fumbled behind himself with one hand for the electric switch beside the door.

His fingers presently encountered the brass plate and then the button. He pressed it. Light flooded the room.

But he was too old a fighter to remain in his tracks. The moment that his finger pressed the button he leaped to one side. And it was well for him that he employed these tactics; for a second after the click of the button the roar of a six-shooter filled the room, and a bullet leaped through the doorway to imbed itself in the opposite wall of the hall outside.

There came another shot as Luckybug, crouched low, dived across the room toward a great old-fashioned walnut dresser, with the hope of secreting himself behind it while he surveyed the situation. But this time the six-gun was aimed at the light in the ceiling. Luckybug knew, because a great slab of plaster struck the floor immediately afterward.

But the marksman missed the six-inch globe by several handbreadths.

Things had happened so swiftly that Luckybug had only a hazy idea of the occupants of the room. He had seen a girl stretched out on an old red velvet lounge against the wall. Beside her knelt the man who had done the shooting. But what these two looked like he did not know, for the orange flashes and the smoke of the firing had obscured their features.

He had leaped toward the wall opposite, where stood the massy dresser. But as the shot which

was aimed at the ceiling light rang out, Luckybug's toe caught in a hole of the worn old carpet, and he pitched headlong on his face.

His head struck the bottom of the dresser. The blow didn't stun him, but it showed him his only chance, now that he was down. The man might bore him with a bullet before he could regain his feet and barricade himself at one end of the dresser. So he did the next best thing and crawled briskly under it, there being just sufficient room.

This took place under cover of the smoke. Now silence came, except for the gasping of the half-choked girl lying on the old red lounge. Apparently her tormentor did not know what had become of the man who had interrupted his cruelty, for he did not fire. Luckybug was safe under the dresser before the smoke had cleared sufficiently for the man to see. And now the hidden raider made ready to finish this thing that he had started, as soon as the atmosphere of the room was clear.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FULL-LENGTH MIRROR.

SLOWLY the smoke drifted out through the open windows, for the evening was close and windless. If anybody else were in the *fonda*, the thick old walls muffled the reports so that they were not heard. Anyway, it was the cool of the evening—the hour for outdoor strolls in Puerta de Luna.

Now Luckybug knew that he had acted wisely, for presently he was able to see the legs of the lounge and the feet and shins of the man who had fired the shots. And since he could see no more of him, he knew that the man could see nothing of him at all.

The silence continued, broken only by the moaning of the girl and the stentorian breathing of the man. But finally Luckybug saw his feet in motion.

He was apparently mystified, utterly bewildered, over Luckybug's disappearance, if the cautious manner in which he moved his feet was any sign. Luckybug watched them moving to the foot of the lounge, then back to their old place again. And then, traveling swifter, they approached the door.

Luckybug thought that perhaps his chance had come. He wriggled himself closer to the front of the dresser. Then he noticed something that had previously escaped him, and a smile twitched the corners of his lips.

What he had seen was a large, full-length mirror

in the wall directly opposite. He realized now, for the first time, that he was in the *fonda's* most magnificent suite, which was let by old Alvarado only to dignitaries and people of wealth and influence. Surely, then, it was no Mexican *peon* that he had to deal with. But the six-shooter had warned him of this before. A thrown knife lodged in his breast would not have surprised him when he burst in the door, but the roar of the explosion had.

There was scant time, however, for speculation. He saw the feet and legs of the man, almost up to the waist now, as they slipped toward the door. In the gilded mirror opposite he saw the reflection of the dresser, and of his own face and figure underneath it. But still he could not gain a view of the man's head and body without exposing his person.

The door closed softly. Luckybug heard a chair being placed under the knob, to do the service of the broken lock.

Now was his time!

With his automatic advanced and ready, he started wriggling farther out, intent on potting the man when he turned from his locking operations at the door—for it must never be said that Luckybug Painter had shot a man in the back.

But he was the fraction of a second too slow. The space beneath the dresser was very shallow, and he had moved with difficulty. The man, turning away from the door, saw him and let go a startled yell. Also his weapon came up and a bullet plowed its way through the carpet six precious inches from the nose of the man beneath the dresser.

Events happened swiftly now. Luckybug per-

force drew back without having been able, because of his trammeling position, to get his automatic in action. The other followed his shot with two long leaps toward the dresser. He did not know, perhaps, that Luckybug was armed. At any rate, he seemed intent on dragging him out or wheeling the dresser away to leave him sprawling on the floor.

But he forgot, it seemed, that the man under the dresser had two hands. For his second leap brought him too close, and Luckybug, dropping his automatic, reached out immediately and grasped his ankles. A heave and a twitch, and the man was sprawling on the floor before him. And in falling he had dropped his gun.

For an instant or two they clawed at each other, like a dog trying to worry a 'possum out of his stronghold in the earth. Neither could get action with his weapon, so they used their fists and fingernails.

But at last Luckybug grabbed for his gun, got it. The other had seen his swift move, however, and was scrambling to his feet, reaching for his own gun as he struggled upward. Luckybug's automatic for the first time awoke the echoes of the old hotel. But his shot was fruitless, for as he fired his hardpressed enemy was leaping to the top of the dresser like a frog.

And now a strange situation indeed came into being. Underneath the dresser lay Luckybug. On top of it knelt his enemy. Both were armed. Yet neither could shoot the other. And directly opposite the dresser was the gilded mirror in the wall, so that both could look at it and watch each other's move-

ments. And over on the old red lounge by the open window lay the girl, still moaning and twisting in pain from one side to the other.

In the mirror the two men glared at each other, and Luckybug was the first to show a grin over the outré development in the battle.

The reflection of the face of the man atop the dresser was that of a white man, though the skin was tanned a deep mahogany. He was a large man, and his hair was almost red. The nose was flat and negroid, the lips thick and protruding. The eyes were small and intensely blue. His age was somewhere close to Luckybug's, his dress indifferent.

"Well," Luckybug remarked, as the humor of the thing came to him, "this looks something like a deadlock, my friend. You can't lean over and pot me, for I'll see you coming in the mirror and beat you to it. I haven't any doubt about beating you to it, because I've seen three samples of your shooting. A man who can't hit that six-inch globe in the ceiling with a six-gun can't hit my head, I'm sure. And you missed the whole of me at the door—also my head and shoulders when I crept out from under here. Why don't you carry a club?"

"Funny, ain't ye!" retorted the other, speaking to the reflection of Luckybug's face in the mirror. "What about me shootin' that mirror over there? Guess I can hit that, can't I? Then who'd have the best of it?"

"I would, decidedly," came Luckybug's retort from beneath the ancient piece of furniture. "The moment you lift your gun to shatter that mirror,

I'll be out of here and pumping lead into your carcass. Try it, brother."

"I c'n shoot out the light," the other said, seeming to be reflecting aloud. "Then the room'll be dark, and all I gotta do is jump off the dresser and pour red lead under it."

"You couldn't hit it the first time," Luckybug tauntingly reminded him.

"Oh, I'd make it in sev'r'l shots, I guess. I ain't so rattled as I was then. But it happens that I don't want that light out—now."

He grinned fiendishly, and with a quick movement flipped a watch from his vest pocket. But he looked warily into the mirror at Luckybug's reflection before he chanced dropping his glance for an instant to the dial of the timepiece.

"It's twenty-five minutes after seven," he announced, looking into the glass again instantaneously. "At half-past I expect some friends of mine. When they get to the door I'll just holler and tell 'em what's happened in here. Then they c'n sneak around on the balcony and pot you through a window. So I'll leave that light on, I guess."

Over on the red couch the girl sat up, holding both hands to her throat. She was a white girl, Luckybug noted as he risked a glance from the mirror to her face. A white girl and very pretty—tragically pretty now.

"You stay where ye are," the man on the dresser growled at her. "I got this bird where I want 'im, and I'll settle with 'im soon. Don't make a move to get outa here, and don't open yer trap, or ye'll wish ye hadn't."

At that instant footsteps sounded in the all but deserted *fonda*. They were in the hall outside, coming directly toward the door.

"There's th' boys, now," grinned the man on the dresser-top. "A little early, but so much th' better. When I hear 'em at the door, my friend, I'll tell 'em about this little play o' yours; and then I'll begin settlin' my account with you."

But Luckybug spoke to the girl, keeping his eyes, however, trained on the reflection of his enemy in the mirror.

"Listen, young lady," he said. "I came in here to help you. So I demand that you do exactly what I tell you to do. In a few seconds from now the light is going out. The instant that it does, you jump through the window onto the balcony and run to your left till you come to a ladder leading to the roof. Climb that, and wait on the roof for me!"

The man on the dresser laughed his ridicule. "The light's goin' out, eh? That's good! Let me ketch ye crawlin' far enough out to shoot th' globe in th' ceilin', and I'll bet ye think I ain't such a bum shot, after all. And my friends are close. They'll be poundin' on th' door next instant."

Luckybug ignored him, repeating distinctly to the girl: "The light is going out immediately, young woman. Jump through the window when it does. Don't be afraid—the man above me won't be able to harm you. Leap through and follow my instructions. Are you ready?"

"Ye-yes," came a faltering answer.

There came a hammering on the door "Hello, Moxey!" came the call. "Open up!"

"Listen, boys!" cried the man on the dressertop. "I got a chair-back under the doorknob. Ye'll have to go to some other room and get out onto th' balcony. There's a bird in here under the dresser tryin' to plug me. I'm on top o' th' thing, watchin' 'im in a lookin' glass. Get around to——"

The roar of Luckybug's big automatic drowned the rest of his excited instructions. Immediately the room was black as night. Luckybug had made the most marvelous shot of his career as a gunman. He had neatly shot out the switch button beside the door.

"Through the window—quick!" he yelled at the girl, as the sound of the explosion ceased.

And in the same instant he heaved up with all his might against the bottom of the dresser, and the man on top flopped on the floor while Luckybug darted out.

He gave the dresser a shove in the man's direction, then leaped after the girl. Behind him as he ran he heard the crashing in of the door, and a medley of angry voices.

Through the window he darted to the balcony that extended the length of the building. As he ran he caught sight of a flutter of skirts above him on the ladder that he had told the girl to climb.

But as he reached the foot of it men were crowding through the windows behind him. A shot rang out, and a bullet whistled past his head.

Next moment he had grasped the rungs and was climbing swiftly, with five men lumbering after him along the balcony.

"We got 'im, boys!" he heard. "He's going' up

on th' roof. We'll have 'im where we want 'im up there! Come on!"

Another bullet whistled past Luckybug's ears as he scrambled over the edge of the roof and grasped the hand of the panting girl.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRAP DOOR.

It was lighter on the roof of the *fonda*. The early stars blinked down faintly. Remnants of daylight still lingered in the western sky.

"Come," said Luckybug to the girl. "Keep hold of my hand. Run!"

But climbing the ladder from the balcony had sapped her strength, for she had been fighting fiercely with her assailant before Luckybug's intervention, and he had choked her almost insensible.

She made a brave attempt, however. She was gasping pitiably, and she reeled as she stumbled along. They had not progressed far over the flat roof of the old building before a shout behind them warned Luckybug that at least one of the pursuers had reached the top of the ladder. And soon three of them were running after the escaping pair, gaining on them perceptibly.

Luckybug glanced back. Then he stooped slightly and swept the girl into his arms. Holding her about the knees and shoulders he darted forward again; but it must have seemed to the girl that escape was out of the question. For they were confined to the roof, so far as she knew, and it would be only a matter of time till they were cornered.

No shots were fired. This did not mystify Luckybug, for he believed that a love affair was at the

bottom of all this business, and that the would-be strangler, though willing enough to punish his girl, did not wish to have her killed.

They had turned the northeast corner of the roof. As the building was in the form of a hollow square, Luckybug was now running at right angles to the course of his pursuers.

He stopped abruptly and set the girl on her feet. He fumbled in the darkness at his feet, and soon a long two-inch plank was in his hands. This he stood upright at the outer edge of the roof. He let it fall, apparently into the street below. But the streets of Puerta de Luna are very narrow. Two vehicles cannot pass each other in these streets. The falling end of the plank, about twenty-two feet in length, dropped with a bang on the edge of the roof across the street, and bridged the gap between the two buildings.

Once more Luckybug swept the girl into his arms.

"Don't wiggle," he urged. "Keep motionless and trust in me."

And the fierce panting of his pursuers was in his ears as he stepped lightly on the plank and ran across with his burden to the roof of the building opposite.

But there was no time to lower the girl, grasp that end of the plank, and send it crashing into the street below, to keep the men from following him. In fact, he heard the clatter of feet on the board as he sprang forward with the girl again. He must spurt now; for in order to effectually stop pursuit, he must gain distance on the men behind him.

He ran in a northerly direction across the roof

of this building. At the extreme edge of it he paused again, set down his burden, and sent another heavy plank crashing to another roof beyond.

Not stopping to glance back, he gathered her in his arms once more and leaped recklessly across the second bridge. And this time he was far enough in the lead to accomplish the thing he had in mind.

He dropped the girl unceremoniously on the third roof, where she fell in a heap at his feet. Then, just as the foremost pursuer thrust out a foot to set it on the other end of the plank, Luckybug jerked his end. The plank went clattering down the side of the building, to crash on the cobblestones below. And on the edge of the other roof a man was dancing frantically to keep his footing and avoid a plunge after it into the narrow alley.

Luckybug had burned his bridge behind him, as it were. Once more he scooped up the girl and ran, while on the roof that he had just left five men congregated and hurled oaths and threats after him.

Then they turned in a body and ran the other way.

Seeing this, Luckybug stopped his flight. He set the trembling girl on her feet and steadied her with one arm.

"Just take it easy now," he told her. "Get your breath and your courage. They think they'll get down in the street, separate, and hunt us down someway—probably surround this building and watch the doors and windows. We'll have to come down sometime, they figure. We will, of course. But when we do they'll not be near to bother us. Just rest a little, and then we'll go."

She stood there in a wilting manner, holding one

hand to her throat, inhaling and exhaling deeply. She did not attempt to speak. Five minutes had passed before he offered to lead her on, and she nodded her readiness to go with him.

He took her hand and conducted her to the edge of the roof of the building they were on. Another two-inch plank appeared miraculously and was made to bridge the chasm between this roof and another. This same thing was enacted several times, and then, on top of a certain building, they turned west and crossed to another roof, then walked southward over it.

Several times more the man lifted his planks from the darkness and stretched them across intervening spaces. Always he pulled them in behind him. And at last he bade her halt while he stooped and opened a trap door at his feet.

He reached down beyond the trap door and pressed an electric button. A narrow shaft, down which extended a metal ladder, was revealed to her.

"Go down this ladder," he urged gently, "and wait for me at the foot. I'll join you as soon as I have closed the trap door over my head."

She obeyed him unquestioningly, and at the foot of the ladder she stood in a bare little windowless room, stuffy and hot and lighted by a single bulb, which had been turned on by the switch above. She heard him softly closing the trap door over her. Then he came down and stood beside her, smiling into her large brown eyes.

"Feeling better now?"

"Yes, thank you," she answered simply.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "You're perfectly safe

with me. You're an American. So am I. I want you to rest some more, and then you must tell me what this is all about. I'll run those fellows out of town for this. What I say goes in this god-forsaken burg. I'm not boasting—it's true."

He reached out and pressed one of the strips of tongue-and-groove with which the hot little room was ceiled. And to the girl's amazement one entire wall of the room began to swing slowly inward. Beyond showed a large lighted interior. She saw a baby grand piano, expensive overstuffed chairs, mahogany walls with gold-leaf adornments, Persian rugs, a highly polished hard-wood floor.

"Step in, please," said Luckybug.

He followed in her footsteps. The large panel swung slowly into space behind him. The girl turned and stared as, like a live thing, it settled into its grooves, and she found herself gazing at what looked to be a solid mahogany wall.

"Be seated, please," offered her strange rescuer. "Don't feel at all alarmed. You are in my home, and here you are absolutely safe. Would you like a cup of tea? Or, considering your recent shaking up, perhaps you wouldn't object to a whisky and soda. I have Scotch, Irish or American whisky. Brandy? Almost any wine you can name?"

"Tea, thank you," she said, and tried to smile.

He pressed a button. A door opened and a fat Mexican woman of middle age, neatly dressed in a serving costume, appeared.

"*Te*, Adelaida," the man said briefly.

The woman bowed. "*Si, Señor.*"

With a swift glance of her glittering black eyes

at the strange white woman in her master's apartment, she backed herself out of the room.

"Just relax and get over it now," suggested Luckybug kindly. "When the tea is ready, and you feel a little more like yourself, you can explain."

But the girl could not wait. Gratitude and curiosity, too, were consuming her.

"I—I can't quite understand all this," she faltered. "I'm bewildered. Do—do you mind telling me who you are?"

He had stepped to a bookcase. Now he turned and smiled back at her. "Not at all," he replied. "I have only one name, so it's not very difficult to tell you. I'm called Luckybug. I'm the most notorious man in Puerta de Luna. Gambler, saloon man, gentleman."

She leaned forward in her chair, her lips, now growing redder, slightly parted.

"You're Luckybug! You say you're Luckybug?"

He inclined his head gravely. She was a beautiful girl, this American whom he had held in his arms and carried across a dozen roofs to safety, when he had expected only to save some ignorant Mexican wench from a beating by her cruel lover. Her hair was dark brown and lustrous, her eyes large and brown and tremendously expressive. Her profile showed deep character. Her head and shoulders, her entire figure, were almost regal.

"Yes, I'm the notorious Luckybug," he repeated. "You've heard of me? Are you disappointed?"

To his surprise she rose to her feet and came toward him unsteadily. She stood directly before him, looking up into his eyes. Her glance was at

once penetrating, questioning, appealing. A smile, half pathetic, came and went at the corners of her lips, and its coming and going brought dimples in her soft smooth cheeks.

Then she took the amazed man's arm and led him across the room. They stood together, facing a large mirror implanted in the mahogany wall.

"I am Nelita Painter, the girl you heard about to-day from Conrad Gaslyn," was the simple statement that she made. "I am looking for my father. He is, or may be, called Luckybug. Look—look at our reflections in the mirror! The same nose—brows of the same cut. Look at the expression of the eyes! Oh, I want you to be *the* Luckybug I have been searching for so long! I want you to be my father! No other man will satisfy me now—after—after meeting you! You must be Jeremy Painter of Sontag! Tell me you are, Luckybug!"

He was trembling from head to feet. This might be a trap to ensnare him, but if it were he did not care. A low cry of longing came from his throat as he grasped her shoulders, turned her so that she faced him, and looked deep into her rich brown eyes.

Then with a smothered cry of anguish he folded her in his arms, turned her head sidewise, and kissed her with the reverence of a platonic lover.

"I am *the* Luckybug," he husked brokenly. "I am Jeremy Painter, of Sontag. And you—you are my daughter Nell! Come what may, I'll stake my life on that!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

It was a long time before they were talking coherently. Then gradually, bit by bit, the girl told the story of her life. When he had heard it all there remained no doubt in the mind of Luckybug that she was his daughter.

She had been taken East when about fourteen years old by relatives of her step-father. They were childless, and the girl had attracted them. She was willing enough to go, for she had learned from people outside her family that Jimmy Keister was not her father, and from that date on she had known discontent.

In the East she had been brought up and educated. The death of her foster mother had followed that of her foster father by a year, and Nell had fallen heir to their small estate.

While the old people had not been wealthy, they had been able to leave her sufficient to make her comfortable. And her first act after acquiring the estate had been to start the long search for her father.

In the pursuit of her quest, she had traveled West, for the East had never appealed to her, and she thought that her father might still be there. She had been told that he was an escaped convict; but she knew also of the circumstances under which he had

been sent to prison. What she knew about him had not deterred her search.

She went to her mother at Sontag first, but it had seemed to her that the welcome was but slight. In her efforts to locate some man who might be able to aid her in her search, she heard of Mr. Conrad Gaslyn, of Las Vegas, New Mexico.

Gaslyn was an ex-sheriff, a man with a record in the West, who had taken up detective work as a free lance. He traveled a great deal over the West, offering his services to cattle associations who needed an expert man to run down rustlers, cleaning up rowdy border towns, and hunting down outlaws. She was told that, if her father were anywhere in the West, Gaslyn would be the man to find him for her.

She was about to take train for New Mexico to get in touch with Gaslyn, when she was approached by a man who gave the name of Baptist Moxey. Luckybug remembered that the name "Moxey" had been called through the door of the hotel just before he shot out the push button. It was Moxey who told her that her father was probably living under the sobriquet of "Luckybug" in Old Mexico, and that she would do well to follow up the lead he had given her.

" 'But what makes you think he has taken that name?' I asked him.

" 'Oh,' he evaded, 'I've got my reasons. I know that there's a fellow living down there, in Puerta de Luna, called Luckybug. He has a big reputation. From what I've heard about him, he looks something like your father ought to look now.'

"I asked him what he knew about my father's looks, if he had known you when you were at Sontag. I failed to get direct answers to these questions. I didn't trust the man. For one thing, nobody at Sontag seemed to know much about him. Also his face was not prepossessing.

"But I considered that I would be foolish to ignore what he had told me, so I went to New Mexico and looked up Conrad Gaslyn. You know the rest, except that it was Moxey who was choking me to-night when you burst in the door."

Luckybug studied her face intently. "Tell me about that," he urged.

"Well, I didn't even know he was in Puerta de Luna until this evening. I hadn't seen him before since I left Sontag, some months ago. Mr. Gaslyn has Room One Hundred, and I have Room One Hundred and Two. I had just returned from dinner below with Mr. Gaslyn. He had gone out in the town for an evening stroll. There came a knock on the door, and I opened it to find Baptist Moxey facing me.

"I tried to keep him out, for his breath smelled of *tequila*. But he thrust a foot between the door and the jamb. The hotel was virtually deserted at that hour, as you know. Moxey forced his way in and turned the key in the lock behind him.

" 'Well, kid,' he began, leering at me, 'have you got him?'

"I asked him what he meant.

" 'Your long-lost dad,' he replied.

" 'No,' I told him. 'Mr. Gaslyn hasn't decided whether or not the man called Luckybug, who owns

this place, is really he or not. He has had a talk with him, but Luckybug didn't admit that he is my father. But why are you here?' I asked. 'I don't understand this.'

" 'Now, listen,' he said: 'You're keeping something back. I want to know whether this fellow is your dad or not, and I want to know now.'

"I was terribly frightened then, and told him over and over that I couldn't answer his question. But he didn't believe me. He had been drinking a great deal, and I guess he isn't accustomed to these strong Mexican liquors. Anyway, he seemed almost out of his head. He threw me on the couch and began strangling me, gritting his teeth and telling me he would choke the truth out of me or he'd kill me. Then I managed to jerk away from him long enough to scream—and my scream brought you. And wasn't it wonderful that you, my own father, should be the one to save me from that brute? The fright and torture were worth such a climax."

In a clumsy, unfamiliar fashion, Luckybug smoothed down her glossy brown hair. He was awed, almost afraid to touch her. This experience was so entirely new to him that he felt like a half-grown boy who for the first time holds his newborn baby sister in his lap.

"What does this Moxey want with me?" he asked.

"I haven't the remotest idea," she replied.

A long silence followed this, with Luckybug studying deeply, a slight frown on his brow.

"You've heard nothing about gold, have you—Nell?" he asked at last.

She shook her head.

"Nor a mine?"

Again the negative.

Then silence set in once more.

"You must be tired and upset after your dreadful experience," he said presently. "I'll call Adelaida and have her show you your room. Then I'll send her with one of my men to the *fonda* for your things. Don't worry about your possessions; Adelaida is careful and will take good care of them. You'd better get a good night's rest. I'll go out and look up Mr. Gaslyn and explain to him that you have found your father and are going to live under his roof."

"Oh, but—but do you want me?"

"I never wanted anything so much in my life," he told her huskily. "And from now on, Nell, you will have no occasion to be ashamed of me. I'm going to change my life completely—for you. Up till now I haven't cared."

"I am not ashamed of you," she said stanchly. "I never have been. I know that you didn't receive justice in court. You merely made a mistake in the eyes of the law in trying to right one wrong by committing another. You were only a boy then. And perhaps you made another grave mistake when you escaped from the prison camp. But who can tell? Liberty is sweet. But it's likely that you would have been pardoned by the governor if you had not been so impatient."

"Yes, I have made mistakes," he agreed. "But it hurt my pride to submit to such an indignity and wait for the governor to pardon me, when, in my own eyes, I had only acted in self protection and

for your mother's welfare. But that's all past, Nell. We'll live for the future—you and I together. But you must know that I don't dare return to the United States."

"I know," she said, simply. "Puerta de Luna will suit me, if you must live here."

"I'll sell out," he declared. "Then you and I will travel over Mexico and Central and South America. Maybe we can find some place in which to settle down that we will like better than Puerta de Luna. Only one thing worries me——" He came to a pause, and again the frown appeared between his eyes.

"Baptist Moxey?" she asked.

"Yes," he admitted. "I can't understand that. And there seems to be a gang with him. Frankly, Nell, they're after me. I know it. I have decided that this Moxey, to further his own interests, came to you and told you about me in order to lead you into an investigation. He hoped, perhaps, that you would induce me to take the chance of returning to the United States. Then he'd have me. He was afraid to come down here and tackle me himself."

"Why, Daddy?"—she blushed as she spoke the endearing name for the first time in her life.

"Well"—Luckybug smiled wryly—"just between you and me, Nelita, I'm considered pretty bad medicine. Several men have tried to get my scalp, but I'm alive and well to-day. I don't want to mention what happened to them. But I've always been a square shooter, girl." He threw back his shoulders with boyish pride. "Rest assured that any man who

received the worst of it when he started in to clean me got what was coming to him."

"I know. I trust you, Daddy. You couldn't be anything but fair. You're my father, you know, and it couldn't be possible that I'd have a father who wasn't square."

He smiled gravely and happily over this display of blind loyalty as he rose to his feet and rang for Adelaida.

"You mentioned gold and a mine," said the girl, as the Mexican servant waddled out to get Pedro to help her bring the baggage from the *fonda.*

Luckybug, who had lapsed into a thoughtful mood, started slightly. "Yes, I know—I know. But let's not talk about that to-night. Nor to-morrow, either. Let's get acquainted first."

"And you must tell me about those boards that you used as bridges this evening. And about the shut-in little room behind the mahogany panel there."

"The room and the boards," he told her, "merely represent a carefully-planned route of escape in case anybody should try to take me back to serve out my sentence in the United States. By using those boards as bridges and hauling them in after me to shut off pursuit, I can travel halfway over Puerta de Luna and not once touch the earth. I have made arrangements with the owners of buildings for the planks to be left untouched on the roofs we crossed to-night. I don't mind admitting that I'm a power in Puerta de Luna. I'm the big frog in this filthy little Mexican puddle.

"And now, my daughter, though I could talk with you all night and enjoy it, you need rest after your

battle with Moxey. I'll show you your room, and you can be getting ready for bed before Adelaida returns with your things. Would—that is——" He floundered to an awkward stop, blushed furiously. "You ought to kiss me good night, hadn't you?" he finished, in great embarrassment.

She laughed ripplingly and came and put her round, white arms about his shoulders. "Who ever heard of a girl who didn't kiss her daddy good night?" she purred.

"And how many lovers have you?" he asked jealously, as he held her in his arms.

"Just one—you, Daddy."

"Honest to goodness?"

"Cross my heart—hope to die! But listen, Mister: Where are you going when I'm tucked safely in bed?"

"To see Mr. Gaslyn," he replied.

"Of course. And then?"

He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Oh, you know what I mean! I'm going to be able to read your every thought in a week's time. You won't be able to fool me the least little bit. You're going out after this Moxey, aren't you?"

"Well, not exactly going out after him," he evaded. "Perhaps I don't want him just yet—until I have found out what he has up his sleeve. I think *tequila* got the better of Moxey this evening. I don't think he meant to show his hand the way he did. Liquor did that. He's probably regretting his act right now, provided he is sobering up. And I must find out what he wants with me. I must watch him, too. I could be extradited, you know.

I am safer here than in the United States, but I'm far from safe anywhere. It would be a difficult matter for the authorities to pry me loose from Puerta de Luna and send me back to the States; I'm too much of a power here. But—— Well, I must look into Moxey's business down here immediately. He has taken a terrible risk. Good night, now. And don't get up to-morrow morning until you feel like it."

"And you'll promise me that you won't get—get hurt? I can't afford to lose you now, right after I've found you after all these years."

"I never get hurt," he replied, without boastfulness. "Good night, Nelita."

He showed her to a handsomely appointed room, large and luxurious, and kissed her again at the door.

"And I can fight, too," she told him, as he stepped away." Mr. Gaslyn taught me to shoot and ride on his big ranch in New Mexico. I—I was taken at a disadvantage to-night, or I might not have needed your help. But I'm glad I did. I'm romantic, you see—a dreamer of dreams. Good night, Daddy!"

From force of habit, Luckybug tapped his hip pocket to make sure that his automatic was safe, then put on hat and coat and stepped out into the shadowy *patio*.

CHAPTER IX.

LUCKYBUG STRIKES.

The owner of The Luckybug felt a new and unfamiliar pride as he crossed the dark *patio* and entered the noisy *cantina*. Back there, under his own roof, he had left his daughter, a beautiful young woman, affectionate, refined, capable, intelligent. It was true that he had had no hand in making her the desirable girl that she was; but he was her father and could not help but believe that some of her admirable characteristics were inherited from him.

His head was filled with plans for her future—her future and his together. He wanted her to travel—wanted to take her around the world as a starter. He wanted her to have everything in life that was good. And these ambitions made him think of the hidden gold up there in the United States, and he speculated over whether it was possible for him to return safely and make an effort to possess himself of it.

He had had, for the past several years, all the money that he wanted. His tastes were comparatively simple, and the indulgences that he had allowed himself had been no great drain on his purse. But now things were different. He wanted his daughter to have the best that money could buy, and his resources were not ample for the carrying out of plans that buzzed in his mind. She must not stag-

nate in this miserable little Mexican city. If she must live away from the United States because of his youthful mistakes, he wanted her to live in some place of importance—Buenos Aires, perhaps, or Paris, or London. And such a move, on top of the preliminary trips to interesting places of the earth that he meant to give her, would call for more money than he could command.

He must figure out some way of possessing himself of that virgin gold which had awaited his coming all these years up there in the United States.

And now Baptist Moxey and his gang seemed to have ferreted out his secret. If he made an attempt, under an assumed name, to slip across the border and see what he could do about the gold deposit, they would be right at his heels, bloodsuckers demanding a goodly share of the wealth in payment for their silence. He saw the entire plot now, he thought. But how had Moxey, whoever he was, found out that the notorious Luckybug of Puerta de Luna, Mexico, was the escaped convict, Jeremy Painter, of Sontag? And, above everything else, how had he discovered that Jeremy Painter knew where Nature had stored up treasure in the earth?

He stepped into the commodious barroom. The bar was lined; the native bartenders were busy. On a small balcony half a dozen Mexican musicians, dressed like toreadors in flaring black velvet pants striped heavily with gold, were rendering dance music on stringed instruments. Dark-skinned men and women danced on the spacious floor. At one end of the room Mexican *monte*, faro, Klondyke,

poker, and other games were in full swing. There was a sprinkling of American cowpunchers, dressed picturesquely and packing six-guns at their hips, and American mining men. There were a few Chinese and Japanese. It was a motley frontier gathering, and the fumes of the potent Mexican liquors filled the atmosphere.

Luckybug stood in the doorway and for the first time felt repugnance. He had something better than this to live for now; he wanted no more of it. Never should Nelita enter this room. He would begin looking about as soon as possible for a buyer of the place, and, if need be, he would make a sacrifice. This, however, he did not consider necessary.

Yes, he would dispose of the business as soon as he had found out what Baptist Moxey was up to. It would not be wise for him to close out immediately, for Moxey would at once grow suspicious, would trail him to the United States, and strike as soon as he was across the line. He must dispose of The Luckybug secretly, then pretend to still be the owner of it for a time, and slip away unexpectedly some night, in order to elude these men.

But first he wanted to find out what they were after.

He crossed the barroom, side-stepping dancing couples that swung his way, and climbed to the balcony, where the musicians strummed their guitars and mandolins. He stepped to the balustrade and looked down upon the noisy crowd, searching every male face in the hope that he might see that of the man who had stared at him in the mirror of Nelita's room. His was the largest and most popular place

of amusement in Puerta de Luna. Everybody came to The Luckybug. Surely Moxey had been here since his arrival in town, would come again, might be here now. If he had not been in Puerta de Luna long, which Nell seemed to believe, there was the chance that he did not know Luckybug by sight. And if this were true, he had no knowledge of the identity of the man who had opposed him in the girl's room in the *fonda*. So far, Luckybug thought that he had the upper hand of the situation.

But he saw no one that looked anything like Baptist Moxey down below, so he descended to the floor again, watched the *monte* game a minute or so, then strolled behind the bar and drew Pedro into conference.

"Pedro," he said in Spanish, "there are five men in this town who are watching me. One of them, perhaps the leader, is called Baptist Moxey, though he may be under an assumed name here. He has reddish hair, thick lips, a flat nose, and very blue eyes, which are rather small. He is heavyset and looks powerful. The others I cannot describe. I want Abrahán to get together some of his friends and scour Puerta de Luna for this man. He may even be stopping in the *fonda*. Have him try there first. I want him located before midnight."

"*Si, Senor,*" eagerly returned Pedro, for he loved intrigue. "I shall send for Abrahán at once. And when this man is found—what?"

Luckybug pondered, and then a smile of sardonic humor twisted his lips.

"Tell Abrahán to have him and the other four arrested for—for something," he said. "And tell

him to ask the captain of the prison to throw away the key."

"It shall be done, *Señor*."

It was two hours later, and five Americans were gathered around a table in a miserable little dive about ten blocks from The Luckybug. The table was set on an earthen floor. Coal-oil lamps dimly lighted the rude interior. There was a small bar, over which leaned drunken Mexicans and bedraggled *señoritas* of Puerta de Luna's underworld.

The five Americans had a bottle of *mescal* and glasses, and they drank the fiery liquor without chasers. They were noisy and obstreperous. One of them, who was making himself the most obnoxious of the party, had reddish hair, small blue eyes, thick, protruding lips and a negroid nose.

A girl, *mantilla* wrapped, entered the dive. She was a very fascinating girl, olive-skinned, large-eyed, oval-faced. She glanced timidly about the room, spoke softly to several of her countrymen, then moved to a bench close to Moxey and his friends.

There she sat all alone, casting wistful glances about, and not forgetting to look at the bibulous Americans now and then. And when Baptist Moxey looked at her she smiled coyly and immediately turned her face the other way.

"Say," said Moxey thickly to his friends, "that's a peach—what? She loves me, too. See her gi'me the once-over? And she's lonely and without a lover. Watch me cop her out."

He climbed clumsily to his feet, helped himself along with a hand on the edge of the table, and lurched toward the girl. A frightened look at once

came into her limpid eyes, and she sprang hurriedly to her feet. As he staggered nearer, she shrank back against the rough adobe wall and cast startled glances right and left.

Then Moxey, with an imbecile smile on his coarse face, began speaking soothing words to calm her. But as he reached out to put his arms about her, she ducked quickly under them and ran toward the bar. With a laugh, Moxey followed her.

It was then that a dark, slippery-looking little *hombre* darted from obscurity in a shadowy corner and disappeared through the door.

Dark, threatening looks were cast at Baptist Moxey as he reeled toward the *señorita*, who had taken refuge among acquaintances of her own sex before the little bar. The hand of one tall *péon* crept up to the wide red sash that was bound about his lean middle, and from which protruded the handle of a knife.

"Look out, Moxey!" shouted one of his friends at the table. "That gangling *hombre's* reachin' for his frog-sticker!"

"Huh!" grunted Moxey, in supreme contempt of all the dark-skinned *caballeros* below the line.

He reached the girl, grabbed her by the arm. She screamed shrilly and struggled to free herself. The knifeblade gleamed in the lamplight. But Moxey, intoxicated though he was, was watchful. Also, in his way, he was a fighter. His left fist, huge and horny, shot out and caught the slim Mexican on the point of the jaw. He fell to the floor like one stricken with sudden death.

Moxey swept the screaming girl into his arms and

tried to kiss her, while his friends, scenting more trouble, rose from the table *en masse* and hurried forward.

But in an instant it seemed that the low-ceiled room was literally filled with Mexican soldiers, with tall, dirty-white caps and grimy linen uniforms, their brown, bare feet padding on the earthen floor as they rushed forward and surrounded the crowd.

"The cops, Moxey!" yelled one of his confederates, as he tried to break his way through and gain the door.

There ensued a brief battle. Moxey and the other Americans fought valiantly, but they were all more or less intoxicated and had small chance of winning over a squad of soldiers with bayonets that seemed to be as long as swords. In five minutes the entire quintette was on the floor, with the little men of arms swarming over them. Handcuffs flashed. They were locked together, jerked to their feet, herded into line, and marched away to Puerta de Luna's dungeon, with a rank of *soldados* on either side.

Then it was that the little man, one Abrahán, who had slipped through the doorway to notify the waiting *sargento* that the time had come for him to act, approached the *señorita* who had caused the riot with a smile on his twisted lips.

"It was well done, Cecilia," he praised her. "Let us now go to El Luckyboog, where are many lights and much pleasure. There my boss will command that you and I be given drinks until our hearts are merry. We shall dance, you and I, and I will make love to you as that red beast of an *Americano* never could."

CHAPTER X.

THE DUNGEON.

NEXT morning Luckybug and Nell breakfasted together, waited upon by the solemn and wondering Adelaida.

"And what did you do last night, Daddy?" asked the girl, as she poured the coffee and her father sat watching her with devouring eyes.

"I didn't leave the *cantina*," he answered.

"But you left here with the intention of trying to find out something about Baptist Moxey, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," he told her frankly.

"And did you?"

"I know little more about him than I did last night," he said. "No sugar or cream, please. I've been in Latin-America too long to ruin good coffee with nonessential trimmings. I'm going to enjoy this cup of coffee as I never enjoyed one before, Nell."

"Why, Daddy?"—as she passed the cup to him.

"Because you poured it," he laughed. "Lord, what I've been missing all these years!"

"That's nice of you," she said demurely. "But what about last night? Aren't you evading a little? I think, from the little I've seen of you, that you're a man who doesn't let the grass grow under his feet. I know you must have done something toward finding out what Moxey's game is."

"By the way," he told her, "you may be interested to know that five strange Americans were arrested about eleven o'clock last night and thrown in our noble Bastile for safe keeping. They were pretty badly intoxicated, I understand, and one of them—a big, flat-nosed, red-headed fellow—started in to bother a pretty little *señorita* who frequents the dives of Puerta de Luna. A tall, lean Mexican drew his knife, and this red-headed fellow knocked him down. It looked, for a time, as if a general scrap between Mexico and the United States were on. But the *soldados* arrived promptly and arrested all of the Americans. Very prompt, our military police down here."

"Of course that must be Moxey and the other four," she decided.

"No doubt of it. I shall have to look into the matter this morning, or perhaps later in the day. Or maybe not until to-morrow or the day following. I'm a sort of international fixer here, Nell. When Americans come down and get into trouble with the military, they usually look to me to square things, instead of the American consul."

"You're a politician, then?"

"Well, a diplomat, let's call me."

"And will you get Moxey and the others out, Daddy?"

"M'm-m! Suppose I let them have a taste of our dungeon for a few days. It's not a pretty place in which to live. And the food isn't all that it might be, I've heard. Also the Mexican officials have a way of forgetting where they put Americans whom they've taken in custody. A very forgetful race,

Nell. These men may not be brought to trial for —oh, maybe months, even years."

"Daddy, you don't mean it!"

"Certainly do. If an American prisoner has influential friends, he can very often have his case settled in short order. Money often helps wonderfully, too. But the American consul doesn't care to be bothered by ordinary drunken tramps who start a row, so the duties of looking out for prisoners from the country of my birth often devolves upon me."

"And can you get Moxey out?"

"Undoubtedly I can."

"Will you?"

"I want to have a talk with him first. I think he'll talk more readily in our Bastile than in the freedom of our big, balmy outdoors."

"Daddy, do you know what I think?" she asked, after a long period of brown study. "I think that maybe *you* had Baptist Moxey and the others thrown into jail."

"They shouldn't have come down here and dared to beard the lion in his den," he laughed. "The preliminary lesson will do them good, Nell. They've got to have fear put into their hearts. For you and I, Nell, are going back to the United States in a short while, and we want to be free to move about as we choose, without being dogged by these thugs. An ounce of preventive is worth a pound of cure, you know. We'll start off by showing 'em what they have to fear if they are figuring on interfering with our plans."

"And what are we going to the United States for?" she asked.

Then, for the first time, he told her all about the Luckybug Lode and what he expected from it, and what he meant to do with the wealth that he hoped to gain by risking his freedom in going back.

"I'll take an assumed name, of course," he finished. "You must make the filings on the claims and pretend to be the owner. I'll keep in the background and pull the strings. You are scarcely known in the West as Nell Painter. You're Nell Keister to the people of Sontag, and that's about the only place you're known, aside from Las Vegas, New Mexico. The gold deposits are hundreds of miles from Las Vegas and Sontag. I don't think that it will be at all dangerous for you to make filings under your correct name. But Moxey and his gang must be silenced first."

"And can you find the place easily?" she asked.

"I can go to it at midnight," he told her. Then, as he folded his napkin: "You had better see Mr. Gaslyn this morning, Nell, and invite him to lunch with us here. I'd like to have a talk with him before we go any further in this matter."

They arose from the table together, and she came around and kissed him.

"See Baptist Moxey to-day, won't you?" she pleaded. "I don't like to think of even him being held in that horrible prison you have described."

"You haven't a very vindictive nature, have you?" he smiled. "Well, I don't imagine that I have, either. I'll attend to Moxey's case this morning, then. Now tell Adelaida to have something nice for lunch. And I'll be back with you as soon as possible."

Luckybug left his property and strolled leisurely along the narrow, cobble-stone streets of Puerta de Luna. He was clad in spotless white from head to feet. Handsome, cool-looking, and serene, he bowed right and left to acquaintances. Smoking a huge and fragrant Mexican cigar, he came finally to the grim old adobe in which the puny civic affairs of Puerta de Luna were administered.

It was a gaunt, picturesque old relic, this ancient *Tribunal*—a veritable castle, with towers and turrets and battlements which were covered with climbing vines. Before the great arched entrance two barefooted sentries, carrying lengthy rifles, with bayonets that seemed equally long, paced back and forth. The dirty-white linen of their uniforms and tall caps, with chin-straps under their jaws, detracted somewhat from the stern importance of their demeanor. They always amused Luckybug, these dirty brown *soldados* who took their military service so seriously.

Several brown-robed monks, even dirtier, with their hideous cowls about their heads and the bald spots gleaming in the sun on top, shuffled about, stoop-shouldered, unshod, bent on the Lord knew what mysterious intrigues. But their dirty palms outstretched toward the visitor were easily understandable, and they mouthed their blessings and crossed themselves devoutly as Luckybug tendered silver coins right and left.

The sentries stood at attention as he came nearer and executed "port arms." They listened respectfully to his requests, and one of them called the corporal of the guard. Then Luckybug was ushered

into the *Tribunal* with no little ceremony; and without ado two guards were ordered to conduct him, their way lighted by a flickering torch, to the dungeons underneath the earth.

No gloomier place could be imagined than the corridors and dungeons that for centuries had moldered beneath the castle walls. They were built of solid masonry. Many rusty iron doors opened and closed behind them as they walked along. A dank, nauseating odor pervaded the place. Rats scurried hither and thither, lean, hungry, repulsive rodents, with fierce eyes and snarling mouths. Ancient blood stains showed grimly on the gray walls, grewsome reminders of past deeds of cruelty. Even Luckybug shuddered a little as he walked under a time-worn gallows and heard the creaking of the iron trap beneath his feet. Above him hung the noose, swaying slightly after a guard's long bayonet had touched it as he passed.

After this three more doors were unlocked with the immense key that one of his conductors carried. Then they found themselves in a low-ceiled room, square and bolstered up with sagging oaken beams. And on all sides of it were iron doors with foot-square openings near their tops, which were heavily barred.

The atmosphere was stifling. The odor of this hell-under-ground reminded Luckybug of ancient mummies that leaked. It would have been black as night but for the red flare of the turnkey's torch. And the tiny cells behind the small barred openings were not supplied with outside windows.

Luckybug shuddered. He could not consent to leave his worst enemy on earth in such a place as this. A year of it, or perhaps a shorter period, would make a wreck, physically and mentally, of the strongest man.

A guard inserted a key in one of the great padlocks, twisted it squeakily. The rusty iron door screeched dismally as, with an effort, he pushed it in.

"Come out, dog of an American!" he commanded brutally, in the Spanish tongue.

It is doubtful if Baptist Moxey knew what he was talking about, but he saw that the door of his dungeon was open and he stepped through with alacrity.

There was dried blood on his face, and one eye was closed and black and blue. His reddish hair, always long and shaggy, now looked like a haycock over which a heavy wind has blown. His shirt was torn, one arm of his coat ripped halfway off. His open, bloodshot eye held a frightened look as it blinked at the flaring light of the torch.

One of the *soldados* who had accompanied Luckybug spread the canvas seat of a camp stool which he had brought along. He indicated that the visitor was to use this as a seat. The two guards posted themselves one on either side of the luckless prisoner, whose vision had not yet adjusted itself to the light, as evidenced by the blinking and watering of his single working eye.

Luckybug seated himself. The guards, stiffly military, stood like statues, ready to brain the prisoner if he made one untoward move. Then Luckybug spoke to the man.

"Well, Mr. Moxey," he said, "we meet again, as the villains say in story-books. Did you pass a comfortable night?"

"God!" groaned Moxey, and the flesh of his face quivered with his terror.

"Was your breakfast satisfactory?"

"I—I couldn't eat the stuff!" came in a voice that groaned.

"You wouldn't care to board here indefinitely, then?"

"Now, looky here, you," growled Moxey, "did ye come here to pester me? If not, what d'ye want? Who are you, anyway? Are you Luckybug?"

"That's what I'm called."

"I thought so! It was you I tangled up with in that room in the hotel, wasn't it?"

"I'm the man who was under the dresser," Luckybug told him.

"And you was at th' bottom o' gettin' me pinched, I guess."

"Perhaps. That matters little, however. I am about the only man in Puerta de Luna who can get you and your friends out of this dungeon, at any rate. Do you want to get out?"

"God!" was Moxey's only answer.

"All right—then maybe we can talk business. You may speak freely; these soldiers don't understand a word of English. I'm Luckybug. You have some business with me. You came to Puerta de Luna with your friends either to begin that business or bring it to a close. Let me know what you're after, then we'll talk about letting you glimpse the sun again."

"What d'ye wanta know?" the man growled sullenly.

"Everything," said Luckybug. "And I want nothing but the truth. Start talking."

CHAPTER XI.

SINISTER MOTIVES.

Luckybug spoke to the guards in their native tongue, and they permitted Baptist Moxey to seat himself on the hard stone floor.

"First," said Luckybug, "I want you to tell me why you went to a certain young lady, up in Sontag, and told her that a man called Luckybug, in Puerta de Luna, Mexico, might be her father. Where did you get your information?"

Moxey was a long time making reply to this opening question, which was in reality the crux of the entire matter.

"Come," urged Luckybug. "I want to warn you that, if you don't come through, it may be that you will never leave this dungeon in an upright position. Have you ever been in Mexico before, Moxey?"

"Yes, I have."

"Then maybe you know something about Mexican prisons and the methods of Mexican prison authorities. I'm a big man here in Puerta de Luna. I'm friendly with the authorities and the people. They trust me and don't at all show me any of the antagonism and suspicion that most Americans down here are obliged to put up with. If I say that you are to stay in this Bastile, Moxey, you'll stay. Remember that. Your liberty is entirely in my hands.

Now come across with everything if you want to see the light of day again."

"I guess I lose, then," muttered Moxey, after a period of thoughtfulness. "Well, I told that girl what you asked about because I—I wanted her to come down and get you back into the United States. Then I was gonta get on your trail and make you pay me for keepin' my mouth shut about a certain little matter."

"The matter of my being an escaped convict, of course?"

"Of course."

"And what did you hope to get out of me in payment for your silence?"

"Why, jack—what else?"

"I believe that's a slang word for money in the States these days. But how did you know that I would be able to pay you enough to reimburse you for the trouble you would take?"

"You got a big business. You're rich. There's lots o' fellows in the States that've been down here and come back and told about your place. You're well known to everybody that's ever been in this part of Mexico."

"But I'm not so rich as some people may imagine," Luckybug felt on. "Rich down here, perhaps; but if I turned all that I own into cash and went to the United States I wouldn't cut any figure at all as a man of means. You know that, Moxey. My money would be worth less than half up there. And, again, what made you imagine that I would want to return to the States? My new-found daughter seems delighted with Puerta de Luna. She has told

me that she is willing to live here. Why should I go up there and be a little frog in a big puddle, where here I'm undoubtedly a big frog in a little puddle?"

"I dunno," growled Moxey. "I just thought, seein' you'd got your daughter, that you'd want to be livin' in the States with her. This ain't any place for a fine young American girl like her to live. I just bet that way, I guess, and lost—that's all."

"I don't think it's quite all," returned Luckybug grimly. "You're forgetting something, Moxey. Do you know of anything else, besides my daughter's future, which might make me wish to return to my own country? Think carefully, now!"

Another space of silence; then from Moxey: "Aw, you got me. They ain't no use to try to bluff. I was figgerin' you'd be wantin' to go up there and work th' gold claims you and an old prospector found when you was in the prison camp."

"Now we're getting somewhere," said Luckybug. "Tell me how you come to know about these claims?"

"They was a fellow who was in stir with you that told me about 'em," came the reply. "They called 'im—— But say," he broke off, with a note of suspicion in his tones. "How do I know that, after I've spilled all this into your ear, you won't go away and leave me here to rot? That would give you a dandy chance to go back to the U. S. A., leavin' me and my pals here in this crummy hole to die."

"You need have no fear of a thing like that," Luckybug encouraged him, "provided you tell the truth right now. Whatever people may have been justified in saying about me, nobody ever told the truth when he said I wasn't a square shooter. If

I've got to fight you, Moxey, I'll fight you in the open. And I'll get you, too. Don't make any mistake about that.

"I won't use my influence with the prison authorities to have you put away indefinitely. I engineered the little coup last night so that I could get you where I wanted you and make you cough up the truth. Then, when I know what I've got to fight, I'll turn you loose and, if you ever pester me afterward, go gunning for you and bring you down.

"You know I'm a bad man to monkey with, I guess, or you would have come down here on your own hook and tried to dicker with me. There's no reason, you know, why I can't be extradited and taken back to the States to serve the remainder of my life in the penitentiary. But you didn't want any of that in yours. You could fairly feel the bullets red-hot in your hide when you thought of it. So you tried intrigue. And if you hadn't got drunk and lost your reason last night you might have got away with it.

"So rest assured that, if you can convince me you have told me the whole truth and nothing else, I'll get you out of here. Fail to convince me, and you may settle your difficulties with the Mexican authorities who rule this town. Now what is the name of the man who told you about the claims?"

"They called 'im 'Jumbo' John," said Moxey promptly.

Luckybug controlled any emotion that he may have felt. He remembered Jumbo John quite well, but was amazed to hear that he knew anything about the gold.

"All right," he said; "let's have the whole of it. How did Jumbo John find out about the claims?"

"He said that when your old pardner died—the old prospector—he helped carry his body outa th' tent where he croaked. And under th' mattress he found a lump o' rich quartz, and on th' piece o' paper that was wrapped 'round it was written, a lotta times, 'The Luckybug. The Luckybug.' "

His listener sucked in his breath. The simplicity of Moxey's story convinced him that it must be true.

"And that's how, when you heard of an American who answered to my description living under the name of Luckybug in Mexico, you came to suspect that I was Number Seven Eight O Nine?"

"Yep. You hadn't oughta named your joint Th' Luckybug, Painter."

"But I didn't realize that anyone knew——" Luckybug stopped abruptly, provoked at himself for his display of amazement. "And why hasn't Jumbo John tried to beat me out of this gold?"

"He bumped," said Moxey simply.

"He's dead?"

"Croaked in a gun fight in Cheyenne three years ago."

"He was paroled?"

"Pardoned."

Luckybug leaned forward. "And why, long before that, didn't he make a hunt for the gold deposit, if he thought a rich one existed?"

"He did," Moxey replied. "He knew about where to go, of course, but he never found it."

"And he told you about where to look for it before he was killed?"

"Well—well, not quite. He was gonta tell me, he said, but—but he got nipped before he ever did it."

"Did *you* try to find it afterward?"

"A little. But I didn't have any jack. I—just—now—looked around a little."

A knowing smile flickered across Luckybug's lips. This man knew less than he was pretending to know.

"Weren't you even able to locate the site of the old prison camp?" he quizzed.

"Not—not exactly."

Luckybug laughed outright. "Your brains are still wobbly from last night," he observed. "You've as good as confessed that you haven't the remotest idea of where this gold may be."

"I know more'n you think I do," retorted the prisoner.

"All right. We'll not quarrel about that. Now, what was your plan to make me come across? And how did you go about working it out?"

"Jumbo had told me you was sent up from Sontag, and that your woman was there. So I went to Sontag to see if I could get track of you; and then your kid come along lookin' for you. I'd already decided the fella in Mexico called Luckybug was this Painter I wanted to find. So I braced th' kid and give her th' tip. I knew she was goin' to N. M. to get this Ike of a Gaslyn to help her. So I drifted down there—me and my pals—and waited till they made th' break. Then we trailed 'em up. I doped it out, once you'd got hold of th' kid, you'd be ambitious for her an' all that, and would try to slip back

into th' U. S. A. to get that gold. And I meant to trail you over th' line, get you where I wanted you, and tell you I'd put th' dicks onto you if you didn't pungle up. We got in last night. And if I hadn't got all lit up on this dam' Mexican booze I'd pulled everythin' off to th' queen's taste, believe me. But that rotten *tequila* made me spill th' beans before th' time was ripe—and here I am."

"You have told a fairly logical story," Luckybug commented. "I believe that you have told the truth, too. You had quite a scheme, Moxey. A brain like yours deserves to be bucking more worth-while problems. What's your line, old-timer?"

"Oh, I'm just a bum—somethin' of a minin' man. Maybe I'm a reg'lar crook, I don't know. But you learned me my lesson this time, Luckybug."

"M'm-m!" muttered the other. He did not just fancy this sudden tone of defeat and contriteness in Moxey's declarations.

He rose from the stool. "Well," he remarked, "I guess you have told me all that I want to know. I'll leave you now. But I'll be as good as my word. You and your friends will be brought to trial, of course, for disturbing the peace, or for whatever charge may have been placed against you. There is no way out of that. All I can do is to see that you are brought to trial as soon as possible. You'll be sentenced, no doubt, to a term of imprisonment. That I can't prevent. But I'll see to it that you are treated fairly, and that you and your pals are set free when you have served your sentences. More than that I cannot do."

"You're gonta leave us in here, then?" howled Moxey.

"I'm helpless to do otherwise."

"And before we get out you'll be beatin' it for th' States——"

"But that shouldn't worry you," returned Luckybug, with a smile. "You're through, you know."

"Oh, *are* we?"

"Well, I can only tell you that you'd better think so, at any rate. But if it's any satisfaction to you, I'll let you know that my daughter and I will be on our way to Vera Cruz in a short time, and from there we'll take a ship for South America. So, if you ever meet up with me in the United States—which is extremely doubtful—it will be years from now. And meantime, The Luckybug Lode is safe. So-long, Moxey. Lay off *tequila*, is my advice, if you have hopes of becoming an expert in the line of intrigue."

He spoke a low word to the *soldados*, and unceremoniously they yanked Baptist Moxey from the floor. While one of them held the point of his long bayonet at the prisoner's back, the other ruthlessly shoved him into his dismal dungeon and locked the door.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HIDE BUYER.

PEDRO, the bartender, had been up on the flat roofs that stretched away from the *fonda* that morning. He had been replacing the planks that his boss had used in his flight of the night before, so that they would be ready if another retreat should become necessary. He was returning to the *cantina* through the hotel office, and had just stepped out into the scented court, when he caught sight of a young woman and a young man seated together on one of the old stone benches.

The young man he had never seen before. But there was no doubt in his crafty mind about his being an American. He was dressed in a light-colored Palm Beach suit and a shapely Panama hat, and held a slender cane between his legs.

The girl Pedro had glimpsed once that morning, as he stepped from the *cantina* to the *patio* for something. She had then been standing in the door of Luckybug's sacred quarters whistling to the birds, which answered her from the fronds of the palm trees. Adelaida had whispered to him the night before that, though she did not exactly know who the young woman was, she was extremely intimate with the boss; and that he had given orders that her slightest wish be granted. Adelaida had thought she was a relative, for she was to stay all night in the

beautiful bedroom with the magnificent furnishings from *Nueva York*.

She was a beautiful girl, Pedro thought, as he crossed the old moss-lined flagstones before the purling fountain and the yellowing marble statues of ladies who wore no clothes. She was as beautiful as the vain peacocks that strutted along the walls. She was dressed in simple white—stockings, small, high-heeled shoes, and all. On her brown bobbed hair the sunlight played till it took on the gorgeous coloring of the bronze-green, greasewood-covered hills where Pedro first saw the light of day. Pedro sighed heavily. He was Spanish-American, and love smote quickly.

But he gasped with consternation as he saw the couple rise before he reached them and saunter slowly toward the forbidden portal of his master's stronghold. His eyes were big and round, and he suppressed himself with difficulty from interfering when he saw the girl entering, with the young man at her heels.

Behind them the door closed, and Pedro stood undecided. He shrugged at length and slouched on to his duties in the barroom. Had not Adelaida told him that the boss had commanded that nothing be denied this girl? But, to Pedro's knowledge, a thing like this had never occurred before. Why, he himself had never been beyond that door! This was sacrilege. He must tell his boss, at any rate.

But the boss forestalled him by returning home through the *fonda* instead of the *cantaina*, so Pedro was robbed of his opportunity to surprise the kind, grave man to whom he was so devoted.

Luckybug, however, was none the less surprised; for when he entered his living room he found his daughter chatting there with a strange young man, who briskly rose, bowed to him, smiled familiarly, and waited politely for an introduction. It was difficult to chase the sudden frown of displeasure from his brow and smile back at the visitor, but, old gambler that he was, Luckybug managed it successfully.

When Nelita had kissed him, she took his arm and led him toward the waiting guest.

"Daddy," she said, "I want to introduce Mr. Kenelm Laplace, a countryman of ours, as you can plainly see. Mr. Laplace—my father, known far and wide as Luckybug."

The two men shook hands, the older perhaps a trifle coldly. Luckybug was always on his guard when introduced to strangers from his native land. Besides, he was inwardly chiding himself over his negligence in not warning his daughter that he did not permit every Tom, Dick, and Harry to enter his private living quarters.

"Mr. Laplace and I met on the train, coming down," the girl hastened to explain. "It was just one of those chance meetings that one has when traveling, you know. Mr. Laplace is from San Francisco. He was on his way down here in connection with—Skins, isn't it, Mr. Laplace?"

"Well, they're hides to the trade," laughed the young man. "I've been down in the plateau region, where the cattle ranches are, Mr.—ah——"

"Just 'Luckybug,'" supplied his daughter. "That's what everybody calls him."

Mr. Laplace laughed again. "Well," he continued, "I've been trying to buy some hides cheap down there. I'm a speculator in many things—particularly hides. And on my way back, knowing that Miss Painter must be here in Puerta de Luna, I thought I'd drop off and see if she had had any luck in finding her father. I see that she has—and I'm tickled to death about it."

Nelita seated herself, and the men followed her example, Luckybug still grave and somewhat uncommunicative. It seemed queer to him that this man, or any other man aside from Gaslyn and the five conspirators now in the grim dungeon under the *Tribunal*, should be aware that Nell had been searching for her father. Why, this man must know, then, that his name was Painter! Luckybug didn't like the looks of things at all.

"Yes," he said slowly, in an effort to make conversation, "our meeting was a rather unexpected and spectacular one, despite the fact that Nell was hunting me. You are on your way back to the United States, Mr. Laplace?"

"Yes, I'm leaving this evening. I have stop-over privileges, and thought I'd utilize them to renew my acquaintance with your daughter. I think that the trip down was less monotonous because we met."

"Mr. Laplace was very kind to me, Daddy," Nelita put in, as if defending the man.

"You met Mr. Gaslyn, of course," said Luckybug.

"Oh, yes. I've known Con Gaslyn for several years. I've dickered with him for hides on many occasions. He has a pretty good-sized cow ranch in New Mexico, you know."

This revelation threw a slightly different light on the matter. Still, Luckybug did not relish the knowledge that this young hide-buyer knew his name to be Painter. Later he would have a talk with Nell about this, and with Conrad Gaslyn, too. Now, however, he must forget his delicate position and, since his daughter had innocently invited Laplace into his home, play the part of the courteous host.

He could not very well avoid asking him to stay to lunch, as it was then after eleven o'clock. He turned to Nell.

"Have you seen Mr. Gaslyn?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I went to the hotel directly after you left and found him at once. He is delighted, Daddy. He'll be here for lunch."

"Good!" returned her father.

And then, as Luckybug had punched cattle in the plateau region, he drew Kenelm Laplace into a conversation that brought many reminiscences to his lips; and the atmosphere had thawed perceptibly when Gaslyn came.

CHAPTER XIII.

GASLYN'S FRIEND.

An hour or more after luncheon, Laplace took his leave, pleading that he wished to get his traps ready for the continuation of his trip, and promising to look in again on them before traintime. It was then that Nell, her father, and Gaslyn entered into a conference regarding the father and daughter's future. But first Luckybug spoke about Laplace.

"Nell," he told the girl, "I must let you know that you made a slight mistake in inviting Mr. Laplace into my private quarters."

Her eyes grew round and held a hurt look.

"Now, don't feel badly about it," he hastened to smooth her ruffled feelings. "It was my fault—not yours. I should have warned you about my peculiarity in this respect. Very few people, Nell, have seen the inside of this portion of the old building since I became owner of the property. There are not many people in Puerta de Luna that I am intimate enough with to cause me to invite them under my roof.

"You see, my life down here has been a strange one. I'm a wanted man, and I've made few friends on that account. I've been something of a recluse, content with my books and my reminiscences and my business activities. This place I consider as sacred as a shrine, and—and I just don't invite folks here indiscriminately, that's all."

"I'm sorry, Daddy. But——"

"Say no more about it," he interrupted her. "The fault's all mine. I neglected to tell you. I thought, of course, that, knowing nobody here in this little Mexican city, you'd be the last person on earth to break my hidebound rule. But we never know what's just around the corner in this life.

"Now, Mr. Gaslyn,"—he swung about to face the dark, tall detective—"what can you tell me about this Kenelm Laplace?"

"Why," answered Gaslyn slowly, "I've known Ken Laplace for several years. As he says, he has bought hides from me. And he's a hard bird to deal with, too. Sharp as a steel-trap."

"Do you like him?"

Gaslyn was a long time replying.

"I can't say that I do, and I can't say that I don't," he finally evaded. "I just know him—that's all."

"Why," Nell cut in, "he gave me to understand that you and he were very friendly, Mr. Gaslyn!"

"Did he? Well, we're not *un*friendly, anyway. You know there are a lot of people in this world, Luckybug, that handle that word 'friend' pretty carelessly. If they've known a fellow a month or more, and neither of 'em has tried to knife the other, they'll say, 'So-and-so?—Oh, yes, I know him. He's a mighty good friend o' mine.'

"Why, say—I once knew a life insurance agent who considered himself my bosom friend just because I'd taken out a policy in his company. And I took the thing only to get rid of him. I wanted to kick 'im off the *rancho* every time I saw 'im coming.

But I never did—so he calls himself a friend of mine. That's about the way matters stand between Laplace and me."

"But didn't you confide in him that I was looking for the father that I'd never seen?" Nelita cried.

"I certainly did not," Gaslyn denied.

Luckybug's suspicions were growing rapidly now.

"How did it happen that he came down with you, Mr. Gaslyn?" he questioned sharply.

"It just happened, that's all. I met him on the train, and he told me where he was bound for. But he'd already made up to your daughter while I was in the smoking compartment. Then, when I came back and found them together, of course I introduced him. He was surprised to see me."

"M'm-m!"—from Luckybug. "How did he approach *you*, Nell?"

"He came swinging past in the aisle," she recounted, "and a lurch of the train threw him halfway into my seat, so that he knocked my open traveling bag on the floor. It took several minutes to collect the conglomeration of things that was strewn about, and—and——"

"And so you got acquainted," Luckybug grimly supplied.

"Well," said Nell, after a short pause, "I'm twenty years old, and I've been told that I'm not hard to look at. I know that Mr. Laplace is fascinating, in a way, good-looking, and very courteous. I seldom flirt, Daddy—but I sincerely hope I'm not made of marble, or dead, or unnatural, or anything like that."

Luckybug and Gaslyn laughed.

"And I was later led to believe," Nell added, "that when Mr. Gaslyn and Mr. Laplace went out for a smoke, Mr. Gaslyn told him all about my quest."

Gaslyn sat up straight. "I plead not guilty," he said quickly. "I did say, I remember, that you were on your way to your father in Puerta de Luna. For I actually believed, from what I'd found out about Luckybug, that this was true. But I didn't intimate that you had never seen this father, that he didn't use the name of Painter, or that there was anything unusual about the business at all. What did he tell you, Miss Painter?"

"I can't remember," she told him, puckering her brow. "I can't recall just what he did say that led me to believe you had confided in him. But I did get that impression, and I suppose I let out more than I should have done, thinking that he already knew. He has a way about him that seems almost miraculous. You tell him things you don't mean to. And it never seems, either, as if he has asked you to tell him. But he gets the information."

"I'll say he does!" Gaslyn agreed. "I consider myself a detective, of a sort. Though I'm not much on subtle maneuvering with words. I'm more for action. I get a line on a bunch of cattle rustlers, and then I lay for 'em, get 'em with the goods, and snap the bracelets on 'em. But when it comes to delicate questioning and being questioned, I'm pretty much of a dub. And I want to tell you that this Laplace got me to tell him how much money I made annually on the ranch, how much I had in the bank at the time, and how much I needed for expenditures during the coming year.

"And he got all this information through asking about one old, sick, roan longhorn that had crawled in beside the corral fence to die. Yes, sir—he began by asking me what that beef critter was worth if he'd been well. Then, half an hour later, maybe, he found out how many beef critters I had. He multipled that number by the sick roan beside the fence, and multiplied that by the number of dollars that brute ought to have brought me. And he kept on, a little at a time, till he knew more about my business than I did myself."

"That describes it exactly," said Nelita.

"But you didn't tell him that I am wanted in the United States, did you, Nell?—he didn't get that much out of you?" Luckybug asked her.

She shook her head emphatically.

For a long time all three sat in silence, but at last the frown left Luckybug's face and he looked up with a smile.

"Well, let's forget him," he suggested. "On the eve of my pulling up stakes here forever, I suppose I am unduly suspicious. What if he does know that my name is Painter, and that I met my daughter for the first time last night? That means nothing to him. We'll wipe him out of our minds. Nell and I, at least, will probably never meet him again.

"Now, Mr. Gaslyn, I'm about to take a serious step. I've decided to return to the United States to attend to a certain business that I have been obliged to neglect for eleven years. Now that I have a daughter, it must be attended to. You're a detective. When I cross the line, it will be your duty to take me into custody and notify the prison

board of the State of California that you have captured the long-wanted Jeremy Painter, Number Seven Eight O Nine. How about it?"

"I need not know that you have crossed the line," was Gaslyn's prompt return. "I'm leaving Puerta de Luna to-night, on the same train that Ken Laplace will take, I reckon. You won't be ready to leave by then, of course. And the good Lord knows where I'll be when you cross the boundary, Luckybug. Though I confess that I'd like to see more of you. But what must be must!"

"We'll probably not go that way at once," amended Luckybug. "Nell and I want to see something of the bigger cities of Mexico and South America first. We'll probably drift up there later, and somewhat unexpectedly. That will throw Moxey and his confederates off the scent. Did you tell Mr. Gaslyn about Moxey's adventure last night, Nell?"

"Yes, I've told him."

"Then I'll tell him, and you, what I found out in the dungeon this morning"—and Luckybug proceeded with his story.

"You say these fellows are just bums?" asked Gaslyn at the conclusion.

"Moxey claims to be—and looks it. The others I haven't seen. But my spy, Abrahán, verifies Moxey's statement that all of them look like more or less inconsequential citizens up there beyond the line."

"Where'd they get the money, then, to keep on your daughter's trail?" asked Gaslyn. "And looky here, Luckybug—it sounds to me like bigger brains

than Moxey's are behind this thing. Bigger brains and bigger money."

"The same thing has occurred to me," Luckybug admitted.

"This Moxey, if I've got his number right, isn't the man to engineer such a plot as that," Gaslyn decided, emphatically shaking his head. "He's just a tool, Luckybug. Now where's the big man—the man with the money and the brains? And how did *he* find out your secret?"

"I have only one suggestion to make regarding that," said Luckybug, with a grim twitch of the lips. "I want to know positively that this Kenelm Laplace leaves Puerta de Luna to-night. And if you are riding on the same train with him, Mr. Gaslyn, I guess you're elected to see him safely over the line and notify me by wire of his subsequent movements."

"Oh, him!" laughed Gaslyn.

And Luckybug's daughter looked indignant.

"All right," Luckybug held on. "Will you do it?"

"Of course," Gaslyn promised. "For your sake, I'll watch him like a hawk until we have to separate."

"Thanks," said Luckybug. "I'll appreciate that, Mr. Gaslyn."

But that night, after the father and daughter had bade Gaslyn and Laplace goodbye before they took a cab together for their train, Abrahán and three of his disreputable cronies began a systematic scouring of the town. Their orders were to get the name of every American who was harbored there, and, if possible, learn his business and where he came from.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BRANCH ROAD.

Abrahán reported to his master next morning that he had been able to locate less than half a dozen European and American strangers in Puerta de Luna. He tendered a list of names, supplied by landlords, and gave such other information as he had gleaned about these sojourners in the Mexican city. And Luckybug could find no reason for suspecting any of them.

That day he learned at the *Tribunal* that the trial of Baptist Moxey and his four associates had, with typical Mexican procrastination, been set for Saturday of the following week. Next day Luckybug disposed of all his Mexican holdings for sixty-one thousand dollars in gold to Bartolomé de Antequera, the local hero of the bull-ring. And one day before the trial Nelita Painter and her father, mourned as dead by Pedro and his associates of the old *cantina*, took a night train for the long trip to Guadalajara. There they proposed to stay a week, after which they would travel on to the City of Mexico, and later to the seaport of Vera Cruz, where their voyage to South America would begin.

As they traveled throughout the Latin-American countries by train and steamer, there grew between the father and daughter an affection that was unsurpassed. Since she had been a tiny girl, Nelita

had longed for a father's love and care, for Keister had showed her no tenderness whatever and she had been always half afraid of him. Ever since he had found out that he had a daughter living, Luckybug had longed for her. She had turned out to be just what he wanted her. And to Nell, Luckybug was all that romance stood for. Their lives and their fortunes became intertwined until they seemed one and the same. They had many lost years to make up. They became pals, and everywhere they went it was remarked that never before had the beholders seen father and daughter who were such close companions.

Still, Luckybug was uneasy. He knew that this could not go on forever. His daughter was grown now. She had ripened into womanhood. She was educated, attractive, warm with affection, susceptible to every new influence about her. Luckybug knew that he could not keep her indefinitely. Somewhere an unknown lover was waiting for her, and it was right and just that this should be the case. Some day youth would respond to youth, and she would be swept away from him into the arms of a husband—who probably would not be half good enough for her!

He had slight fears of losing her while they were traveling from capital to capital of the picturesque South. The test would come when they journeyed to Europe or to the United States.

Well, he would be ready for it. He would play fair. He would not stand in the way of her future happiness, even though he knew the sacrifice would wring the heart that had hungered so many years.

Yes, he would be a sport. Luckybug had always been a sport and an admirable loser.

From the east coast of South America they went to Cuba, and thence to London. They spent a year in Europe, then took steamer for South America once more, crossed the continent through the Canal, and visited Lima, Peru, and Valparaiso, Chile, on the west coast, and various inland cities.

The steamship that eventually carried them to the United States under the name of Noble docked in San Francisco one bright April morning, a year and eight months after they had left Puerta de Luna in the night. Luckybug had chosen this name because it seemed to sound consequential. And "Nell Noble" struck him as just about all right, for they had decided never to let it be known that the name she had been christened under was Nelita.

Luckybug's money, the amount of which was still over a hundred thousand dollars—for the business had been profitable down there below the line—was on deposit in a San Francisco bank. His new signature was sufficient identification, as he had made arrangements to that effect before sending his little fortune North.

Neither of them had any fear of recognition. It was nearly twelve years since the father had escaped from the prison camp, and Nell had never been in San Francisco till now. Many changes had taken place in the features of Luckybug. He was now a man of middle age, a trifle portly, graying perceptibly at the temples—adorably so, Nell told him—good-looking and prosperous-looking, well-dressed, and possessed of a convincing air of experi-

ence and importance. Where theretofore he had been clean-shaven, he now wore a stubby mustache, always carefully cropped. Nell was two years older than when she had left Sontag for New Mexico, two years riper—and a girl changes fast between twenty and twenty-two—two years prettier, with a new poise which was the result of the cosmopolitanism of the past twenty months. Their disguise, they felt, was ample, for it was not an artificial disguise.

They stopped at the St. Francis Hotel, registering as from Valparaiso, Chile. They had not been in their suite two hours when a newspaper reporter called and asked Luckybug for a short interview.

This was something that Luckybug had not counted on. He wondered at it, and finally decided that, because he had taken an expensive suite and had registered as from Valparaiso, his visit to the city might cause a reporter with a nose for news to try him out.

He told the young fellow that he was a mining man; that he and his daughter were in San Francisco on a pleasure trip; that, while in the United States, he might look into certain mining possibilities of which he had information; that they would leave as soon as they had seen the important sights of the city by the Golden Gate. This seemed to be about what the reporter wanted, and when Luckybug declined to subject himself or his daughter to being photographed, the news hound took his leave.

They spent four pleasant April days in jaunting hither and thither over San Francisco and the Bay Region; then, in their suite in the St. Francis, they

settled down to a discussion of their immediate future.

Luckybug had bought an automobile map, and together they bent over it. He showed Nell the location of the prison, the trend of the beautiful American River winding by.

"We were working on the other side of this ridge," he explained, "a good many miles from the penitentiary. I understood at the time that we were building a road that eventually would become part of the State highway. So I thought that an automobile road map would be just the thing to give me my bearings. Here, you see, are roads stretching in all directions. But none of them looks right to me. I thought that the road on which we were doing the preliminary dirt work would have been paved years ago, and would be a main thoroughfare by this time. But the only road that looks as if it were anywhere near the right place—and it's indicated as a highway, too—doesn't run in the correct direction at all.

"See this mountain, Nell? Our camp was on this side of it. And there is no road indicated as on this side. This one—the one I've been speaking about—runs on the other side of the mountain. I can't understand it. And I don't like to ask questions. Of course I'm foolish in that; but when I remember that the road I want is in reality so close to the penitentiary, I shrink from talking about it with a stranger."

"You musn't have that hunted feeling," she reproached him. "Can't you just forget——"

"I'll never be able to forget," he told her with a grave smile. "And so it strikes me that the best

thing for us to do is to vanish from here and go up into that country for a private investigation. We'll start to-morrow morning, if you're agreeable."

They crossed on a ferry to Oakland at an early hour next day. There they took train for Sacramento. Luckybug had decided not to continue on direct to Folsom, the prison town, but to engage an automobile and a driver at Sacramento and travel into the vicinity by a less conspicuous route.

Reaching Sacramento, they made arrangements for their car and driver for an early start on the following morning, then took a taxicab for the leading hotel, where they spent the night secludedly.

They were off next morning at eight o'clock. When they had covered two-thirds of the distance between Sacramento and Folsom, Luckybug had the driver stop. He brought out his road map, and together they studied it. The man proved that he knew the roads and the country very thoroughly.

"Is this part of the highway?" asked Luckybug, indicating on the map the road that had puzzled him.

"Yes, it runs up through Fever Cañon and in that way to the south o' Jackstone Mountain."

"That's this mountain here?" Luckybug pointed.

"That's Jackstone Mountain."

"I haven't been in this part of the country for a number of years," said Luckybug, taking the bull by the horns. "But I seem to have a recollection of a road that ran east and west on the north side of Jackstone Mountain."

"There's what's left of an old road on the north side," the driver told him. "I guess it was aban-

doned before I come into this part o' the State. It's all covered by slides. I was on it once when I was deer huntin' up in there."

"How long have you been in this part of the State?" asked Luckybug.

"Seven years and over," was the reply.

Luckybug leaned back against the cushion. "Well, drive on to the beginning of the road that runs on the south side of the mountain," he instructed. "Are there any ranches or towns on it?"

"Yes, several ranches. There's a little settlement or two where gold dredgers are workin' the river. There's a post office and store and a couple or more houses halfway of the mountain. They call the post office Nine Mile. It's on Nine Mile Creek."

"Can we get anything to eat there?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then let's see what it looks like."

They had invaded a wonderful country. Far off the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada glistened in the sunlight. All about them oaks were just putting forth their tiny leaves. Buckeyes, the early birds of the foothill country, were in full leaf already, and their intense bright green was almost dazzling. The land was rocky and rugged and wooded heavily. The road twisted about hills, along shelves hacked in the sides of steep cañons covered with towering pines, crossed innumerable riotous streams leaping down from the higher elevations. Now and then, through breaks in the hills, they looked down long, steep, timbered slopes to the green American River, winding its way like a monstrous serpent toward the sea.

They passed around the toes of Jackstone Moun-

tain and followed the winding way of a precipitous cañon. This was Fever Cañon, which the driver had mentioned. They were in the heart of that glamorous district where gold was first discovered in California, the gold that brought the eager 'Forty-niners westward, hauled by strings of groaning oxen, or buffeted by the wintry seas that lash about Cape Horn. The road wound ever upward through a land almost as romantic and adventurous as in those hectic days when frenzied men gouged virgin gold from the crevices of the rocks.

And then they came to a dirt road that led due south at right angles to the highway they were traveling. Here where this road branched off there stood a sign. Luckybug called a halt when he read:

TO NANCY'S DISHPAN
FOUR MILES

"What is Nancy's Dishpan?" asked Luckybug.

"Ranch," replied the driver.

"Is it an old one?"

"Oh, yes. Old-timers, the Hulettes. They've owned The Dishpan for thirty years, I've heard."

"Cow ranch?"

"Yep."

"What sort of people are the Hulettes?"

"Nice folks. There's old Ed Hulette and Mrs. Hulette and a boy named Dan. They're old-timers —you know what that means. They run a lot o' cattle in these hills, too. Seven or eight thousand head. Pretty good bunch for the foothills country.

Besides th' family, they's about a dozen punchers helpin' with th' stock."

"I believe I'd like to see Nancy's Dishpan and meet the Hulettes," Luckybug suddenly decided. "Back up and shoot us over there."

And to Nell he said in a low voice: "If anybody in the country knows what has become of the road I helped to build, it will be these old-timers in the mountains."

Nell nodded understandingly and smiled, then let her gaze rove off again toward the snow-capped Sierra. Her nostrils quivered as they drew in the delectable odors of spring.

CHAPTER XV.

NANCY'S DISHPAN.

The road to Nancy's Dishpan was fairly level as it wound about the contours of the mountains, which made a uniform grade possible. On their right the cliffs towered above their heads. On the left the land dropped almost sheer to the waters of Nine Mile Creek. But before the automobile had traveled the four miles the road began ascending and cut across the top of a baldpate hill, where only a few wind-beleaguered conifers threw their arms in all directions, free to develop as they chose in this unhampered situation.

On the other side of the hill a beautiful timbered valley lay below them, round in shape, a green sink in the heart of the mountains, a gigantic hand held palm upward, in the hollow of which snuggled the fields and ranch houses which the travelers were seeking.

"That's Nancy's Dishpan," informed the driver, speaking over his shoulder out of the right-hand corner of his mouth. "I've heard that a woman named Nancy Something-or-other squatted in that swale durin' the gold rush, and was murdered. She called it her dishpan on account o' the kind of a round dish shape it's got, and it's been called Nancy's Dishpan ever since."

"It's as picturesque as its name," said Nell to her

father, as the road twisted them among the big-boled pines, descending easily into the pan.

They came to a gate in a rail fence, and Luckybug sprang out and opened it. Two enormous bull pines stood guard, one on either side of the entrance. The pan had of necessity been cleared of most of its forest growth, and alfalfa fields spread their early greenery on both sides of the road. But no more trees had been cut than was essential to clean cultivation of the land. Here and there, standing alone or in groups, mighty pines upreared their proud tops towards the eternal blue above. The long, low ranch houses, built of logs, the rustic brown of which blended so indefectibly with the natural surroundings, stood in a congregation of lofty trees. The effect had the completeness of a well-assembled painting.

"Oh, it's perfectly fascinating, Daddy!" cried Nell. "These people are artistic. I could die happily here."

"Why choose to die here?" he smiled back at her. "Maybe we can make arrangements to live here instead. How would you like that—for a while, anyway?"

"If we could have saddle horses, Daddy——" She clasped her lip with her white teeth in girlish ecstasy:

"Saddle horses, of course," he agreed. "Life here without a horse to ride would be a mockery. Let's see if they'll take us in for a week or more—or indefinitely, for that matter." He glanced at her significantly, and she knew that he wanted to make Nancy's Dishpan headquarters from which to sally forth and search for the hidden gold.

"You're on!" she cried happily.

Then the car drew up before another gate which was designed for pedestrians only, and a woman and several men, the latter all garbed in conventional cowpuncher outfits, were coming through the door to a broad veranda to find out who had invaded their cherished solitude. The car came to a standstill, and the driver stopped his motor.

"Hello, there!" called a tall, lean man with a flaring black beard. "We're jest settin' in to dinner. Come in and join us, won't ye?"

"Sounds promising as a starter," chuckled Luckybug as he helped his daughter out of the car.

The lank, black fellow was coming down the path to meet them, a path bordered by lilacs, with buds just bursting forth at the tender kisses of spring. But before his rolling, saddle-cramped stride had brought him close enough to thrust forth a horny hand, an event took place which instantly riveted the attention of every one there to the exclusion of everything else.

Around the corner of the rail fence through which the car had passed came a man on a rawboned salt-and-pepper horse, and the two came spectacularly. The colt apparently was a running bucker, for he progressed forward in long, jerky leaps which kept the man in the saddle intensely occupied. But the bucker changed tactics when he came abreast the gate, and showed that he had other tricks in reserve which he had not yet demonstrated.

He stopped in his tracks, shivered all over, and squatted. Then he leaped straight upward, bent like a hairpin, and straightened out his hind legs while

in air. He came down on these hind legs and started walking about in an erect position. He twisted suddenly and lunged backward. But the rider was out of the saddle before the crash, and in it again as the colt rolled over and scrambled to his feet.

His snort of anger sounded trumpet-like through the stillness. Then up he went again, wheeled entirely around in air, and landed with a straight-legged jar that must have shook his rider to the core.

Nell and Luckybug stood, fascinated, and watched as the colt sunfished again and again, and then settled down to a rocking-horse teetering from front hoofs to rear.

"Rake 'im, cowboy!" yelled a man from the veranda, and another: "Give 'im th' gut hooks, buckaroo!"

But the rider did not use his spurs.

The men were laughing, for the horse continued almost in his tracks, working steadily like a walking-beam. They threw taunts at the rider, who cast a quick glance their way and grinned. The tall, black-whiskered man was leaning forward, slapping his thigh with his great, broad hand to express his merriment. Luckybug watched with an amused smile on his lips, for the scene carried him back to his early days as a *vaquero* on Mexican cattle ranches. Nell looked on with parted lips, her heart pounding wildly for fear that the rider would be thrown and broken to a pulp with the crash.

But no such thing occurred. For of a sudden the colt remembered that, when all was said and done, he was a running bucker by profession. He leaped

forward, bucking in long, easy leaps, and bore the man on his back to the top of the baldpate hill. And the last that was seen of the conflict, the horse was shimmying from sight on the other side, bucking feebly but running as if the fiends of the bottomless pit were at his heels.

The black-whiskered man, with tears of sheer enjoyment dripping down his cheeks, slapped Luckybug vigorously on the shoulder, with the same lack of formality that baseball fans who are entire strangers accord to each other when an unexpected good play is made by members of the favorite team.

"Ain't he th' ridin'est fool, brother!" he bellowed. "Didn't that kid waltz pretty with th' lady! That Reading boy beats all git-out when he throws his haunches in th' saddle. I told 'im I'd give 'im that colt if he could stick on his back a minute, and, by golly, he's stickin' yit! And I'll say that brute's got a belly full o' bedsprings! I lose a wallopin' colt, but it was wuth it to see 'im shoot that boy's backbone up into his brains like he done when he was buckin' on a dime, front o' th' gate there. . . . Well, that's over, I reckon. Come on an' set in with us, you folks. My name's Ed Hulette— er Ole Man Hulette, whichever suits ye best. This here's yer daughter, I c'n see plain as th' nose on yer face. Might I have yer name, Mister?"

Luckybug, with an appreciative smile at the wholesomeness of the greeting, placed a hard, firm hand in that of Ed Hulette.

"Noble," he said. "Jerry Noble, I'm called. And my daughter is Nell Noble."

"Please' to meet ye, folks," beamed Hulette, swal-

lowing Nell's small hand with his great, thick fingers. "Come right in. She's gone ahead, I see, an's gettin' chairs an' things fer ye. How 'bout th' boy that drove yer car?"

"He brought his lunch along, I believe," Luckybug explained. "Anyway, he didn't care to come in. We didn't come here to intrude on your hospitality, Mr. Hulette. My daughter and I are looking for a quiet, picturesque place in the mountains where we can stay for a few weeks' outing. Seeing your sign on the highway, I asked the driver to let me have a look at Nancy's Dishpan, and——'

"And here ye are!" interrupted Hulette. "Well, come right in an' throw yer feet under th' table, an' we c'n talk turkey later. We don't live very high, for we don't go to th' store often. We ain't got a speck o' canned stuff, it bein' spring and our winter's supply all et. We ain't got nothin' fer dinner but chicken *a la Maryland* (She's from Maryland and cooks chicken that way), mashed spuds, an' green things outa th' garden, an' wild-mushroom sauce, and milk and buttermilk, but——"

"Nothing *but* that!" Nell shrilled. "What on earth do you have when you give a feast?"

"Why, canned salmon, sometimes, and canned pineapple, an' th' like," Hulette explained apologetically.

"I'm glad that winter is over," said Nell. "I think that I can struggle along with chicken *a la Maryland*, and green things out of the garden. How 'bout it, Daddy?"

For answer Luckybug took her arm, and the big man strode beside them to the door.

"And—and if you could take us in for a week or so, Mr. Hulette, could we have saddle horses?" the girl asked eagerly.

"I got a hundred ye c'n pick from," was the black man's reply.

Luckybug wondered if Edwin Hulette had never suffered by reason of strangers taking advantage of his whole-souled confidence.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SEARCH BEGINS.

Ed Hulette, the guests at Nancy's Dishpan discovered, usually referred to his wife as "She" or "Her." A roly-poly little woman she was, little because of her short stature, but weighing over two hundred and twenty pounds. Her face was round and smiling and motherly. Her gray hair was parted in the middle and smoothed tightly back to a knot above the nape of her neck, in the style of fifty years before. Her dress was brown, and it followed the lines of her ample figure with painful exactitude. It was buttoned down in front with innumerable buttons, as neatly aligned as a rank of infantry.

She called everybody deary, regardless of sex, and bestowed the title upon Nell immediately. She cooked for fourteen hungry men for about half of every year, when the force was quartered at Nancy's Dishpan, with only a sixteen-year-old girl from a neighboring ranch to help her.

Nell and Luckybug were introduced to Dan Hulette, an awkward, gangling boy of twenty-two with a shiny red face, who stared at the girl as if she had come from another planet, and to the company of cowpunchers, who scraped and bowed and looked uncomfortable, and then fixed their glances on their plates as if they had been reprimanded for looking up from them.

The meal was bounteous and cooked by an expert. The travelers were hungry from their long ride, and "She" and her husband and the girl helper heaped food on their plates until they begged for mercy.

Conversation at the table was slack until some bold cowpuncher brought up the subject of the recent contest at the ranch-house gate. Then all of them began talking at once, it seemed, and Nell was glad to listen.

"It's like this, Mr. Noble," Hulette explained: "That there Reading boy has been punchin' cows for me fer over a year. He's one o' th' best cowhands I ever hired, an' they ain't a man at this table that c'n set as pretty in a saddle as he can. And he ain't no common stock, either. He's been to school a lot back East, an' his folks are reg'lar folks. He's a gentleman, that boy. He drifted over this mornin', and we was kiddin' 'im about that ornery colt several o' the' boys have forked, to their sorrow an' everlastin' *dis*grace. Twain he'd never hairpinned th' brute, an' we was kiddin' 'im. An' finally I says th' colt is his if he can stick on his back for sixty seconds. I knew he was a ridin' fool, but sixty seconds on a bad one's back is like sixty years in Tophet, and I didn't think the boy could cut th' mustard. Course he eased 'imself off when th' gray sat down on his back, but he'd stuck out his minute before that happened. The hoss is his, an' he's ridin' 'im home. Whether they'll stop when they git there is another matter.

"Well, we'd all jest oozed in fer dinner. This Reading boy had come over to th' ranch for to borry a slab o' bacon, an' seein' he was in a hurry to git

back, She'd fed 'im early. We'd all jest gone in th' house when he ketches up this brute an' throws th' saddle onto 'im, all alone, mind ye! He was gonta holler to us when he come whoopin' past, I reckon, an' yell to me to time 'im. But you folks drifted in jest then, and he got his grandstand filled without liftin' his voice. Know anythin' about ridin' bad ones, Mr. Noble? But I reckon not."

"On the contrary," said Luckybug, "I have been a *vaquero* myself. I've straddled some pretty tough propositions, too."

"Ye don't say! Ye don't look like ye'd ever been a puncher, Mr. Noble. Big ranch owner, I guess."

"No, just a common saddle tramp," laughed Luckybug. And to guide the conversation in another channel, he quickly asked: "This Reading isn't working for you now?"

Ed Hulette screwed up his face to indicate disgust and disappointment. "No," he answered, "that boy's turned nester. About six months ago he ups and leaves us, and first thing we know we hear he's filed on a homestead claim over on one of the forks o' Nine Mile Crick. He's got a pretty nice piece o' land, too, but there's a heap o' clearin' to be done before he c'n seed much of it to crops. Meantime he lays to work for me wintertime fer his grubstake. Think of an honest cowpuncher *plowin'*, Mr. Noble!"

"You called him Reading and then Twain," Nell put in.

"Twain Reading's his name, ma'am," Hulette explained. "He says his folks named 'im after ole Mark Twain, th' funny writer, though th' boys says Mark Twain wasn't th' fella's right name at all."

The *vaqueros* of Nancy's Dishpan had been bolting their food in an alarming fashion, and were rising, one by one, and hastening from the commodious dining room. At last only "She," her husband, and the visitors were left.

Nell had been telling "Her" about France and Italy and Spain, and the kindly round face was beaming with interest, while her tongue clucked her boundless astonishment over the marvelous sights which the girl described. Luckybug and Ed Hulette were engaged in a conversation about the Reading boy's chances of making good on his claim, with only a year's savings from a cowpuncher's pay as backing.

But finally Luckybug maneuvered successfully until they were discoursing about the country in general which surrounded Nancy's Dishpan.

"I've been through here before," said Luckybug. "And it seemed to me, that, as we neared Jackstone Mountain to-day, I recalled another road that used to run on the other side of it."

"She's there yet—what's left of her," Hulette returned. "That road was built some ten or twelve years ago by convicts from th' penitentiary. Folks thought then that it was gonta be a State highway. But th' first winter cooked 'er. That soil over there's all rotten-stone, and when th' rains got goin' good an' hard she slid an' slid till that road was pretty near covered.

"So she was abandoned *pronto,* an' they built th' one on this side o' the' Mountain. Didn't worry me none—put my ranch within four mile o' the' State highway. It was pretty near twenty-two mile to th' other road. We was sure one shut-in little bunch

before they run th' road this side o' Jackstone, Mr. Noble. Now we feel like we're right in th' heart o' Sacramento.

"An' so I got me a machine last year, jest to show we was up an' comin' over here; but I'm a-scared to drive th' thing anywhere outa these mountains. A hoss with hair onto him he c'n dodge, but that tin mustang can't!"

When Luckybug asked his host if he could manage to board himself and daughter for a couple of weeks the response was immediate.

"Yes," said Hulette, "I been aimin' to pick up a little extra mazuma thataway. I built three log cabins last fall, thinkin' city folks might like to rent 'em durin' th' summer months. Ye see, there's Nine Mile Crick that a body could swim in, there bein' a dandy big swimmin' hole about a quarter of a mile from th' house here. Then, She raises a fine garden every year, an' we got gooseberries, currants, cherries, apples, and things like that. Milk and buttermilk a-plenty. Good hosses to ride an' plenty o' saddles. Fresh meat, home killed, th' year 'round. An' a country about as picturesque as ever lay outdoors. Ye're th' first bidder, Mr. Noble, so ye c'n have yer pick o' th' cabins. They're all furnished an' everythin'. An' She an' I'd jest naturally be overjoyed to have ye 'round."

They inspected the cabins after leaving the table, and in less than an hour Luckybug had made arrangements for an indefinite stay at Nancy's Dishpan. They took their leave of these homely people and were driven back to Sacramento. Three days later they sent their baggage to the ranch in an

automobile truck, and preceded it in a fine new closed car which Luckybug had bought.

Two days afterward they were comfortably settled in a picturesque little log cabin of three rooms within a stone's throw of Nine Mile Creek.

And when their home-making operations were over father and daughter put on new, stiff chaps and riding boots, flannel shirts, spurs, and Stetsons, and sallied forth on horseback one bright morning to begin the final episode in their search for the Luckybug Lode.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NAME OF THE CREEK.

Both Nell and her father were saddle-weary and stiff when they camped, about one o'clock, on the bank of a little stream. Neither had ridden a horse before for a long period of time, and they had traveled far from Nancy's Dishpan this first morning of their search.

They had followed the dirt road from the ranch to the paved highway. On the highway they had galloped around the foot of Jackstone Mountain and, after a great deal of wasted effort, had stumbled upon the abandoned route of travel which the State prisoners had built about thirteen years before.

They found this road all but obliterated by a succession of slides. But cattle found it still convenient to pass that way, and had made a crooked, narrow path, which wound about the slides, in their ceaseless comings and goings upon the earth. It was not a difficult feat for the saddlers to follow this snaky trail, and the two adventurers had set off upon it with ever mounting spirits.

The morning had been crisp and clean, the breath of the pine trees sweet. But gradually as the sun crept higher and higher in the sky the freshness vanished, and the heat which beat down on the mountain-side added to their discomfort.

But their spirits were not cowed. Their quest

was a romantic one, and both were thrilled with expectancy. Even the fact that Luckybug seemed unable to recognize any part of the country as they pressed forward did not serve to dampen their ardor.

Now, however, the saddles were off and the steaming horses were munching rolled barley in their nosebags, which, with their lunch, the gold-seekers had brought along behind their cantles. It was cool and restful beside the little creek, arbored by draperies of grapevines, and beside the camping spot tall green ferns nodded gently in a soft breeze that stole down the little cañon.

Nell laid out the lunch while her father collected dry twigs and made a fire over which to boil a pot of coffee. They sat on the ground presently and grinned at each other over Gargantuan sandwiches.

"This country's changed," Nell's dad remarked, when his stomach, protesting against the hurry, demanded that the cargo be not brought aboard so fast. "This was all heavy forest when we were working here. Now the trees are comparatively thin, and the chaparral claims the land. You've noticed the down trees, no doubt. There are lots of them. And the trunks are blackened.

"A big forest fire has swept across this area since the road was built. That let sunlight get at the soil, and the chaparral has grown up in place of the trees. This causes a mighty change to one who hasn't lived here right along. I told you once, Nell, that I could find the gold ledge in the dark. I retract that statement. It's going to be a difficult job."

"Oh, we'll find it eventually, Daddy," she encouraged him with the inflexible confidence of youth.

There came suddenly from close at hand the tramp of a horse's feet. The chaparral on the opposite side of the creek was parted as a rangy gray horse came breasting through.

Nell caught her breath in a little gasp. The man in the saddle was the buckaroo who had unconsciously entertained her and her father when they first reached Nancy's Dishpan.

He was a young man, lean-waisted, sun-browned, of about medium height. His eyes were gray-blue, and their color contrasted oddly, though not unpleasingly, with the heavy coat of tan on his face. The smile that he cast across the creek at the campers was comradely and unabashed. He was picturesque in gray flannel shirt, brush-scarred chaps that had once been heavily fringed, high-heeled riding boots, and the inseparable Stetson, not so carefully creased as a motion-picture cowboy's.

"There he is," said Nell in a low voice to her father, and Luckybug glanced at her quickly. She had spoken as if they had just been talking about this "Reading boy," or as if he had been in her thoughts.

"Yes, there he is for sure," the father laughed. "And he's looking about for a way to get his horse across the stream. He wants to make medicine with us, it seems, but the creek's too noisy for him to make himself heard from there."

The opposite bank was inordinately steep, and studded with huge, irregular chunks of granite. Over and about these the rider contrived to maneuver his horse, and finally, with the animal slipping on his hocks, they plunged *kerchunk* into the rapid

waters. The gray forded belly-deep, clambered up the bank on the campers' side, and snorted to all within hearing that the feat had been accomplished.

"That's the same colt that he was riding that day," Luckybug murmured to his daughter. "Look how he answers the rein now. Can you beat it! That boy's a horseman!"

Nell's brown eyes were beaming, and again her father watched her curiously. He was quite positive that she had had no opportunity to speak to young Reading. She had never before, he felt sure, seen him so close as now. But there was no mistaking the fact that she was deeply interested in him. He *was* a rather ruggedly handsome young sprout, Luckybug admitted. But Nell could have known nothing of this from having seen him ride that day.

The gray stepped close to the edge of the camp and stopped, pawing the earth. Twain Reading swept off his hat and grinned good-naturedly at the man and girl. Then he left the saddle, light as a feather, lowered the bridle reins, and walked toward them, spur-rowels whirring through the juicy grass.

"How do you do?" he greeted them. "I'm Twain Reading, one-time cowpuncher at Nancy's Dishpan. I know you folks. You're Mr. Noble and his daughter. Welcome to my unproductive acres!"

Luckybug had advanced to meet him. They shook hands. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Reading," he said. "We've heard about you, and had the pleasure of seeing you ride that colt when we first came to The Dishpan. Have some grub with us."

He had released the homesteader's hand, and the young man stepped quickly toward Nell. With a

slight frown Luckybug noted that his daughter's cheeks were pink as she held out her fingers in greeting. Never before had he seen her show any emotion beyond friendly interest or curiosity when good-looking young males were being introduced to her. Here, he thought, was a specimen that would bear watching.

The socially prominent and sophisticated youths of Europe and South American capitals had not fazed her. But here it seemed that she might succumb to a manly young fellow of the outdoor life, whose activities were as picturesque as his personality. And, besides these attractions, Reading was sophisticated, too. In every word and glance he showed incontestably that he was well bred, and intellectually and socially many notches above the common cowpuncher.

Luckybug wondered if the hour for his great sacrifice was at hand!

"Miss Noble," Reading was saying, "do you know that, when I was riding the gray colt that noon, the big fur coat you were wearing struck me as about the strangest thing in the world? That was when he was handing me that walking-beam stuff in front of the gate. My teeth were rattling; the blood was pounding in my head. My side ached, and I expected every moment that the blood would spurt from my mouth and nose. The scenery was blurred. The ranch houses, trees, fence, and your automobile looked like a whirlwind that had picked up a million tons of roast-beef hash. The only thing that stood out as individual at all was you in that big fur coat.

"Even then I didn't know that you were a girl.

I had noticed the machine when the horse raced me from the corral, but hadn't time to wonder who'd come in it. And for quite a time my befuddled wits were wondering how that big brown bear got into the ranch-house yard. They told me afterward that the Miss Noble who had arrived that day had worn a brown fur coat that came down almost to her ankles."

His laugh was clear and boyish. He had held Nell's hand throughout the speech.

Nell laughed with him. Then they looked at each other and laughed together again.

"Wasn't that funny?" he asked her.

"I never heard of anything so funny," she rippled on.

Luckybug blinked his eyes tightly as one does sometimes when his brain seems befogged. Funny? Well, perhaps. It wasn't painful, at any rate. But why two such intelligent young persons should find it so excruciatingly funny he failed to see. He had heard men tell Nell many a funnier story without her going into hysterics. Luckybug had never felt that tremulous, unexplainable thrill that comes to a young man and a young woman when it seems to both that they have discovered what they have been yearning for since adolescence.

"Have some grub, Mr. Reading," he repeated.

Which had the desired effect of temporarily distracting Mr. Reading's attention from the girl.

"Why, it isn't considered polite out here to decline," he grinned. "If you've plenty. Besides, I'm hungry—which is a better excuse than ever. Wait till I souse my hands and face in the creek. No—

don't need a towel. Sun-dry 'em. You people are a long way from home, aren't you?"

He did not wait for a reply, but slipped down to the water's edge and washed his hands and face in the clear, cold water. Then he returned, still laughing—about something.

"Mudpuppy," he explained. "He was trying to climb a little bank down there. He worked like a horse, and figured it out this way and that way, and then when he'd reached the top he fell off and lit in the water once more. And there wasn't a sign of disappointment on his face as he began all over again."

Nell laughed with him joyously. Here was a man who loved life. Even a clumsy mudpuppy, one of Nature's most elemental products, interested him and appealed to his sense of humor.

"You've worked wonders with that gray there," Luckybug observed. "Why, he acts as if he's been bridlewise six months."

"Thanks," laughed Reading. "He's some little hoss. And he thinks I'm 'the Lord said unto Moses.' I didn't rake him that day, maybe you noticed. I knew I was going to ride him out, and that if I did he'd be my horse. And I needed a saddler. So I didn't torment him with that old form of cowpuncher cruelty. I counseled with him after that first ride, and in a few days we were getting along fine. I knew all along he had a head on him and that kindness would win him. And there he stands, waiting for me to swing into the saddle and do what I want to with him."

"What's his name?" asked Nell, as she poured Reading's coffee from the blackened coffeepot.

"John Silver," was the answer. "I called him Silver first, because, when he's clean, his gray coat fairly gleams. Then I thought of *John Silver* in 'Treasure Island,' and, as John seemed more companionable than Silver, I mated 'em. Besides, I've always been an ardent admirer of old *John Silver*, peg-legged hero of my boyhood days."

"Didn't you say 'Welcome to my unproductive acres' when you shook hands with me?" asked Luckybug.

"Sure—and I meant it. This is my estate you're on. Mine when I've convinced Uncle Sam that for three years I've been a nice little boy and plowed and harrowed and seeded to his entire satisfaction. We're on the ragged edge of the worst piece I've got—that is, agriculturally speaking. But it's picturesque, and I ride here often to brood and wonder what I am and why. Here I like to look at the water in the creek and forget what it is worth to me for irrigation."

"What's the name of the creek?" Nell's father asked.

Of his two listeners, Nell, at least, gave a perceptible start when Reading's answer came:

"They call it Luckybug Creek. I like the name, and I like the busy little water bugs that gave the creek its name. So I call my homestead Luckybug Ranch, since the creek flows through it and directly past my cabin door."

CHAPTER XVIII.

LUCKYBUG RANCH.

Nell cast a quick glance of apprehension at her father as Twain Reading pronounced the name of the creek on whose banks was their little camp. But once more in his career Luckybug's training as a gambler traced a look of unconcern upon his face.

But he was thinking, and thinking deeply.

How the name persisted! It pursued him, confusing him at every turn. He had had no idea, when working in the prison camp, that the name of the creek below the gold ledge was Luckybug Creek. He had never been told—had never asked. But it was the most natural thing in the world that Luckybug Creek should be its name. Creeks, he had found, were usually named by early settlers much as an Indian boy is claimed to be christened.

It is said that, when the boy is born, his mother, or squaws in attendance on her, immediately look out of the wigwam, and the child is named after the first thing that strikes the eye. Thus, perhaps, Rain-In-The-Face received his name by reason of some eager squaw's glance having first fallen upon a man whose face was wet with rain. Young-Man-Afraid-Of-His-Horse probably received his famous title by reason of some Indian youth's timidity in handling an unruly mustang, which was the first sight viewed

when the denominating squaw peered from the wigwam door.

Western natural landmarks are named in much the same manner. A creek lined with oaks will, upon discovery, be designated Oak Creek. A pioneer forging his way down some remote cañon sees a coyote leap away through the chaparral, and he names the scar Coyote Cañon. The myriads of water bugs that scooted over the surface of this creek, then, had caused the discoverer to call it Luckybug Creek, even as the old prospector and Number 7809 had named their gold ledge because of these same little luckybugs in the stream below.

Nell and Twain Reading were chattering again, and Luckybug was left to his brooding thoughts.

It seemed improbable that Baptist Moxey had known that the gold was near Luckybug Creek. It must be that he never had heard of a creek of that name. Else, knowing what the discoverers had called the gold ledge, he would have had a fine clue by which to trace the precious metal. He would have had no reason to look up Luckybug in Puerta de Luna, Mexico.

No, it was certain that Moxey had never heard of Luckybug Creek. Jumbo John, Luckybug's fellow convict who had found out the secret, had not known the name of the creek, either. Or, if he had known it, the information had died with him.

Luckybug had long ago decided not to call his gold mine, if it ever developed into a mine, The Luckybug. He had considered it too risky, remembering what had transpired down there below the border. But now it struck him that he might as well

call it that name, after all. For if it ever became famous—if word ever got to the newspapers that a new gold mine had been opened up on Luckybug Creek—the mention of the creek's name alone would be enough to bring his enemies down upon him. He could not keep the news from the papers, he felt sure—especially if the lode was as rich as the old prospector had believed it to be. By the same token, he could not prevent the name of Luckybug Creek from appearing, either.

He was tremendously worried over the outlook. It seemed to have been a fateful day when he and the old man named the ledge. Secrecy had flown away forever with the naming. And why—oh, why had he been so stupidly sentimental as to nickname himself Luckybug down there in Mexico?

He overheard and understood, despite his absorption, the conversation of his daughter and young Reading. The latter was telling the girl about his picturesque homestead and its possibilities. He had been obliged to fight to get it, for it was indisputably in a mineral district, and the Land Office had been loath to grant his claim. So he had squatted and fought it out with the Secretary of Agriculture and the General Land Office, and finally had secured permission to give the soil a year's trial, during which time he must prove that it was more suitable for agricultural purposes than as mineral land or forest reserve.

"The soil is wonderful," he was enthusing. "It'll grow anything, Miss Noble. And I've all the water I want in Luckybug Creek, for there are no ranches above me to claim it. Even if there were, they

couldn't use all of it, and the overflow would run back into the creekbed and come on down to me in the end. Even mines operating above me would have to turn back what they couldn't use, and it wouldn't be unsuitable for irrigating purposes, no matter how they treated it.

"I'm going to make an enlarged homestead of it as soon as I've convinced the powers that be that it's top farming land. That'll give me a hundred and sixty acres more. I want to raise beef stock. Let 'em range in the foothills here during spring, paying the cheap government pasturage rates in the National Forest, and drive 'em up to seven thousand feet for more government grass in summer. Winters I'll corral feed 'em on my ranch. And I'll bet you my beef stock will bring in a prettier piece of money per head than Old Man Hulette's will. Can't tell him that, though. He says I can't raise anything to speak of on my homestead. Merely because not much has ever been raised in these foothills. I've marvelous apple land—cherries—peaches—raise anything, by golly!"

"Isn't it wonderful to have such a glorious future before you!" breathed Nell. "I just know that Old Man Hulette, though he's an adorable old dear, hasn't the slightest idea of what he's talking about!"

"How about a road to your homestead, Mr. Reading?" Luckybug put in unexpectedly. Temporarily, at least, he had banished thoughts of the ticklish situation he scented in the offing.

"Well," was the hesitating reply, as Reading turned over on the ground so that he was looking straight at his questioner, "that's more of a prob-

lem, Mr. Noble. There's the old Convict Road, as we call it, back there a little way. Guess you and Miss Noble came along the cow trail that follows the old grade in riding here. We call it the Convict Road because it was built partially by "honor" prisoners from the penitentiary, over to the north. But it's impossible, I guess. It was abandoned on account of the rotten-stone slides, and it would be useless to clear it. That's what the Highway Commission decided, anyway—and they ought to know.

"I can never use that, I suppose. But I've a way out. The deer were the preliminary surveyors of my route when they worked out a trail over the contours through the chaparral. Then came the cattle, who broadened it and made it more consequential. They say that Main Street in every city, you know, was born a cow path. I use it riding to Nine Mile for my mail and grub. The grade is all that could be desired. But it'll cost a lot of money to turn that trail into a road.

"However—— But say, why not ride around and see my little place? I'd be glad to have you. Don't mind my boasting, though, when I point out the prominent spots."

"Let's take him up, Daddy," Nell urged.

For answer, Luckybug rose with a smile and grasped the horn of his daughter's saddle, preparatory to breaking camp.

They rode down the creek for about a mile, following a twisting trail. Then the narrow cañon opened up, and the hills on the left stood back. The riders came out upon a beautiful little flat, about

one boundary of which swung the stream, close to precipitous hills on the right.

Near the creek stood the homesteader's cabin and his stable, spreading live oaks about them. The natural clearing comprised some fifty acres, the proud squatter informed his audience. Beyond the grassy open space the hills were gently sloping, and, when cleared of their heavy growth of chaparral and scrub oaks, this land, too, would be productive.

"It's a beautiful spot," Nell told him. "What an ideal place in which to spend one's days—if one loves the earth and the things that grow on it!"

The creek bottom before the cabin was delightful. There was a level stretch of gravel, with here and there an immense boulder cropping out. Grapevines hung lazily from tall alders. There was a tiny waterfall, where the white water foamed and fumed into a pool deep enough for swimming.

"Ever pan the creek for gold?" Luckybug asked casually.

"Yes—got color, too. I expect to do more of it when I have more time. Fellow might pick up two or three dollars a day, if he was persistent."

"If there's gold in the creek," said Luckybug, "there must be a ledge somewhere in the hills above it."

"Well, there may be," replied Reading musingly. "But, again, the dust in the creek might have come from far up the country. All of the streams in this locality were pretty well gone over by the 'Forty-niners. And they've been panned many times since, I imagine. What gold is left down at bedrock is merely what the old-timers missed."

"Yes, perhaps you're right," Luckybug returned absently. "Still, many a valuable lode, close by, has been missed because the search for it in the hills above the creek where the float appeared wasn't thorough enough, or the prospector had little luck."

He turned to his daughter. "I think, Nell," he remarked, "that, if Mr. Reading will show us the mouth of his trail out of here, we'd better be hitting the grit for home."

"I guess that's so," she agreed. Then, hesitatingly, "I've invited Mr. Reading over to dinner tomorrow, Daddy. Don't you suppose he could stay all night at Hulette's?"

"No need for that," put in Reading quickly. "We think nothing of riding home at midnight in this country. Why, I've known the Nancy's Dishpan boys to ride twenty-five miles in an afternoon, dance till one o'clock in the morning, ride back under the stars, and be on the job at sunup."

"We'll be glad to have you, in any event," said Luckybug in a tone that was polite if not exactly warm.

CHAPTER XIX.

COMPLICATIONS THREATEN.

It was after dark when Nell and her father reached Nancy's Dishpan. "She" called to them as they rode past the gate and insisted on their coming in to supper, which had been delayed because the men had not gotten in from work as soon as they had expected to. So they let one of the cowpunchers take their horses to the stables and accepted the invitation.

After the meal Luckybug and Old Man Hulette sat on the broad veranda, smoking. Nell had gone home. Luckybug turned the conversation to the subject of Twain Reading and his homestead.

"So you see th' place, eh?" asked Hulette. "Pretty spot, ain't she? But th' soil in this country ain't anythin' to speak of, Mr. Noble. Good for grass—that's all. That boy'll just naturally starve to death over in that little *escondido*."

Escondido in Spanish means "the hidden." Luckybug thought the term appropriate.

"Where did he drift from?" he asked.

"He's a New Englander," Hulette replied. "Boston, I think. He had all kinds o' high an' mighty idees when he first hit Nancy's Dishpan. He was just a hobo, he said. But he'd learned to fork a hoss in th' late war, an' he hadn't been on th' ranch long till he become th' best rider I had. I like th' fella.

That's why I don't want 'im to lose out over there. But, shucks! He's young an' c'n begin all over again any time. What's th' difference?"

"He doesn't seem to be much of a roughneck," Luckybug felt further.

"Roughneck! That boy! I should say he ain't! He comes of a fine family. He's been to college and all. He was an officer in France. He's kind an' gentle an' true. We like 'im a heap."

"Folks have no money, I suppose," Luckybug ventured.

"I don't know about that. I've heard a lot o' them old Boston families get along on their respectability, and don't need much money. But he never said anythin' about his people's financial standin'. Money don't seem to pester him a heap. He jest wants life outdoors. I never saw a boy so confound'ly in love with jest hangin' 'round an' lookin' at th' sun and th' trees and everything that's growin' like that there Reading boy."

"He *must* be in love with nature to choose to live out here in the hills when a career might be open for him back East."

"Yes, yes—so I've thought time and ag'in. But it wasn't none o' my business, so I never said nothin'."

Luckybug didn't know whether to consider this as a mild rebuke or not. He did consider, however, that Reading's past, his family, and his outlook on life were swiftly becoming his business.

"He got discouraged with civilization, I reckon," said Hulette after a long pause. "Told me once, I remember, that he studied law in college. Said he'd been admitted to th' bar, too. But his first two

or three cases disgusted him complete. He said there wasn't any justice in law courts to-day, and he'd got a bellyfull of it.

"Said they was a murder case he got tangled up with. He had a pardner. He knew, he said, th' bird was guilty. So did his pardner. Smooth talker, this pardner. Well, they took th' fella's case, anyway—against young Reading's judgment. An' he said it was rotten. How they got a boneheaded jury up there—deliberately picked boneheads, he said—an' twisted things 'round till they wasn't no truth in it.

"Th' murderer'd just been married, an' his woman was about to have a baby. She was pretty, Reading said. Put her on th' stand, though she didn't know hardly anythin' about what her husband had done; and Reading's pardner made her turn her pretty face toward th' boneheads while he told 'em she was about to become a mother, an' wouldn't it be a shame to send th' father of an unborn babe to th' 'lectric chair when th' young couple was jest startin' out in life, and a lotta bunk like that, till he got 'em weepin.' And they goes out an' comes back in an' returns a verdict of not guilty.

"Well, that an' a couple other cases got this boy sore, an' he give up an' come out West, where, he said, he hoped things was clean. His folks raised a row because he quit his practice—an' I guess they're on th' outs. And that's about all I know o' the' boy's past, Mr. Noble. But I know he's keen for law enforcement an' all that, and th' words right and justice mean a lot to him. Too bad a fella who

feels like that couldn't stick, ain't it? Th' grafters stick, I notice."

"He has a certain mold of the lips and an intensity of gaze that make him look as if he might be a stickler for what he believes to be right," admitted Luckybug. "It would be hard to swerve him."

"Swerve him! That boy! I'd's soon try to swerve a breachy cow from goin' through a drift fence when her calf's bawlin' f'r her on t'other side!"

* * * * * *

In the little cabin that Nell and her father called home the girl lighted a coaloil lamp and proceeded to make the beds, which task she had been obliged to postpone that morning because they wanted to get an early start.

She finished and sat down to await her father. The long ride that day had wearied her immeasurably. They had attempted too much, strangers as they were to the saddle for so long a time. But her eyes were glowing. She noted this as she caught sight of her face in the mirror of the old-fashioned walnut dresser with which her bedroom was supplied. There were two pink spots in her cheeks, too. And it seemed to her that the face which peered back at her from the looking-glass was a trifle shamed.

She tossed her head. She had nothing to be ashamed of. The man did interest her—no, fascinate her. Why deny it? He was tender, considerate, manly, brave, picturesque, true—and he laughed with sympathy when mudpuppies fell down banks that they had climbed. He was just such a man as she had dreamed about ever since her sojourn on Conrad Gaslyn's ranch in New Mexico, where she had discovered that pavements and overstuffed fur-

niture were not for her. Every cowboy or miner or outlander of any description whom she had met had attracted her. But at the same time their uncouthness had repelled. Twain Reading was different. He was a gentleman in chaps and spurs. She had discovered her ideal. She was going to love him. She knew it. *She loved him already!*

The face that looked back at her from the mirror was radiant. A year and a half had added to her beauty; she was now nothing short of striking. She knew that she was almost beautiful. Did *He* think her so?

There came a soft tapping at her door. She had not heard her father returning. With a guilty blush she left her place before the mirror and invited:

"Come in, Daddy."

Luckybug entered. "Not in bed yet?" He smiled at her. "Your face is flushed. Too much spring wind on your tender skin at one dose, I guess."

He looked at her admiringly, proudly. She was distractingly feminine and pretty in negligee. A low groan escaped him. "Nell," he cried, "you're the prettiest thing God ever made!"

"Oh, no, Daddy—not that!"—but she was measurelessly pleased.

He came close and took her in his arms. She lifted her lips to his.

"When we've starved for each other all these years," he said huskily, "it wouldn't be fair if we were separated now, would it?"

"No, not fair to either of us," she acceded.

"But some day you'll find a man who wants to marry you. Then what?"

"Suppose I want to marry him? You wouldn't

be selfish, would you, Daddy? You wouldn't be giving me up, you know. I'd still be the same to you. And I wouldn't leave you."

"No, you couldn't be the same," he told her soberly. "And if you loved your husband, and he wanted you to cast me adrift, you'd do it."

"No, Daddy—never! You're my hero. You have been ever since I heard your name."

"Do you like this young Reading?" he quizzed bluntly.

"Of course. Don't you?"

"I don't know whether I do or not," he confessed. "I haven't had time to figure him out. He likes you, Nell—tremendously."

"Oh, are you sure?"

"As sure as I am that the sun will rise to-morrow morning, Nell."

"Well"—thoughtfully—"I want him to like me. I think he must have many commendable qualities, Daddy. He's so straightforward—so enthusiastic—so genuine— so——"

"So confoundedly good looking and picturesque," Luckybug cut in.

"Luckybug Painter"—and she shook an accusing finger before his nose—"you're as jealous as a lover!"

"I am," he pleaded guilty. "I admit that freely. But listen, Nell: Don't be in a hurry. You're only a girl yet—not twenty-two. My Lord, child, there's lots of time!"

"Why, you speak as if some man had asked me to marry him and I had accepted him."

"I'm just feeling around—reconnoitering, as it were, to find out how to build my defenses, Nell. He's

a possibility—I'm watching him. You met many handsomer men in Europe and South America. Yet you——"

"But they weren't my kind," was her quick defence.

"And Reading is?"

"Well—nearer, I'll say. But don't be foolish, Daddy. This is the first day in my life that I ever spoke to the man."

"That's just the trouble," said Luckybug, as he kissed her good-night. "If you look at him like you did to-day, how'll you look at him a month from now? Good-night, now. Sleep tight, and don't let the bedbugs bite. I just want you to be careful, Nell, and not do anything hastily. Take your time—watch your step. Know your man thoroughly before you decide to give yourself into his keeping for life."

"Cautious old Daddy!" she ridiculed him. "And all about nothing! Good-night! Are we going to hunt for the ledge again to-morrow?"

"I think not," he answered. "We'll rest up a day. I think that, after you and Reading and I set out to go to his place to-day, I got my bearings."

"Really? Then— Oh, Daddy!—" She stopped short, lips parted. And after a little: "He told me that all the land on both sides of the creek below where we were camped is on his homestead claim."

"I know it," said Luckybug gravely.

"Then it's possible that—that The Luckybug Lode is on his land!"

"Highly possible," her father replied. "In fact, I'm almost sure it is."

CHAPTER XX.

A GUEST.

As proposed, Nell and her father rested the day following their first trip in search of the lost lode. Afoot they investigated Nancy's Dishpan more extensively than they had had an opportunity to do before, and watched the horse wranglers working with unbroken colts which were destined to become cow horses before the season's end. In the afternoon Nell took a swim in the deep pool close to their little cabin. At five o'clock Twain Reading galloped in on Silver.

He had made no pretense at dressing up. He was free and easy and perfectly at home the minute of his arrival. His frank, honest, sunburned face was as open as a book. But Luckybug, studying that face more carefully since his short conversation with Hulette about its owner, became positive that here was a man as fixed in his ideas as his Puritan ancestors. Whenever anything of a controversial nature cropped up in their conversation, his blue eyes would begin to snap and his nostrils to quiver. A look almost fanatical claimed his features. He had his ideas of what was what, this fellow had; and he was ready, even eager, to fight for them to the last atom of his energy.

It was while they were at dinner that Reading made such a startling observation in such a matter-

of-fact way. What he said would have been startling to nobody else on earth, perhaps, save Nell Painter and her father.

"I dropped in to say hello to Her and Old Man Hulette before I rode on down here," he said. "I see they have a visitor over night. Fellow that I must say I don't like any too well, though he's never done me any harm and I have no reason to dislike him. Just instinctive on my part. He's a sort of petty hide buyer named Kenelm Laplace. He's conceived the idea of traveling around to big cow ranches over the West and buying up hides from them."

Luckybug had paused with a forkful of food on its way to his mouth, but he quickly steadied himself and cast a warning look at his daughter.

"I shouldn't think it would pay him," he said complacently. "There can't be many hides for sale on ranches. The beef stock is sold on the hoof, and the hides accumulate in the packing houses."

"You're right, of course," returned Reading. "But that's just where this fellow's idea comes in. There are a great many ranches that butcher to quite an extent. More than you'd think, Mr. Noble. For instance, Old Man Hulette here kills a lot of beef stock in a year. He sells meat to nearby resorts, mines and meat markets. Sometimes a rancher will get a standing order for a year's supply of beef from a construction contractor in a country where a big railroad is building. Cases like that, you understand.

"Well, the hides accumulate on such ranches; and Laplace makes it his specialty to nose out these

places and buy 'em up cheap. I understand he knows the hide-and-leather game pretty well, and makes a lot of money."

"Does he come here frequently?" asked Luckybug, trying to make his tone disinterested.

"Once a year, I think. I met him when he was here last year. Before that, of course, I don't know anything about his movements, as that was before I rambled West."

Luckybug thought it advisable to change the trend of the conversation, for surely it would not seem logical for him to be greatly interested in the coming of an itinerant hide-buyer. But he was longing for a private word with Nell, and the opportunity for this was not offered until after Twain Reading had ridden away at half-past nine.

As the sound of the gray's hoofbeats died out, Nell, standing on the little veranda beside her father, slipped a tiny warm hand into his.

"Well, how about that for a piece of news?" she asked.

"A remarkable coincidence, of course," Luckybug answered after a period of thinking. "And not such a remarkable one, either. If this Laplace travels over the West in search of ranches where hides may have accumulated, it's only natural that he should hit upon Nancy's Dishpan. But I'll admit that Nine Mile, California, is a long distance from Puerta de Luna, Mexico."

"What on earth can we do about it, Daddy?" she puzzled.

"We must contrive to pump Old Man Hulette, or somebody connected with the ranch, and find out

whether Laplace has been coming here regularly over a period of years. Before he got acquainted with us, in short. If last year was the first time he came here, I'll be extremely worried, Nell. For that may mean that he was the brains behind Baptist Moxey and his gang. And that, knowing *about* where the gold was located, he came into this country and made up to the Hulettes preparatory to our coming. But, of course, we spent a year and eight months abroad, which fooled him. Now perhaps he has come again to find out if we've been in the neighborhood.

"But if he has been coming here for hides for several years before he met us, I'll call it merely a strange coincidence. But he mustn't see either of us. He knows you as Nelita Painter and me as Luckybug. Whether he really is after us or not, uncomfortable complications would arise if he were to see us here. Or course, if we're mentioned up at the ranch house, we'll be referred to as Noble.

"We'd better lie low until he's gone, or contrive some way to sneak our horses out unseen to-morrow morning and get into the woods before he's about."

"Let's try to do that," Nell suggested. "We can get up early and saddle our own horses before the boys are stirring. We can find out about Kenelm Laplace later."

"All right. Set the alarm clock for four-thirty. And we'll pack our grub and traps to-night. I don't fancy the idea of hiding in a cabin all day when there's gold to be found out in the hills."

The result of following this plan was that Luckybug led the two horses to the cabin door next morn-

ing while it was still dark. He returned to the stables and brought back an armful of hay and an extra amount of barley, so that the animals could eat while their riders were at breakfast. They finally rode off on the road to the highway shortly after the triangle had been rung at the ranch house to call the hands from their bunks. They felt sure that the Hulettes' guest would not be stirring at that early hour.

Reaching the highway, they galloped along it to Nine Mile where they took to Reading's trail between the post office and his homestead. This made a much shorter route than they had taken on their first trip, when they had continued on the highway in the opposite direction to pass around the foot of Jackstone Mountain on the Convict Road.

The trail was leading them parallel with the banks of Luckybug Creek before nine o'clock in the morning, and before ten they had reached the place where Reading had found them camped. Only steep, rocky hills and a heavily timbered stretch now separated them from Luckybug Ranch.

Back from the creek they dismounted, threw off the saddles, and picketed their horses in a small natural meadow. Then in heavy hiking shoes instead of riding boots, they returned to the creek bottom and began a search of the frowning, rocky hill that overhung the stream on its eastern side.

An hour after they had left the horses Luckybug dropped to his knees below a monstrous overhang and began working with the short-handled pick that he had brought along.

Nell stood with parted lips and glistening eyes and watched him. Once she breathed the question:

"Have you found it, Daddy?" But he gave her no reply. The sweat was streaming down his face and neck as he delved forcefully under the overhang. White quartz showed in the muck that he pushed behind him. At last he dived under, and next instant stood beside her, panting.

"There!" he cried boyishly. "How do you like the looks of that?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TREE OF GOLD.

Luckybug had dropped into his daughter's palms a lump of pinkish quartz, from the veins and crevices of which something flashed back the light of the noonday sun. It was bright and glistening, this gold, and traced delicately in a pattern somewhat resembling a spreading tree.

"Oh, Daddy!" was all that Nell could gasp.

"We've found it," he told her in a low, tremulous tone, he who ordinarily was wont to show so little emotion in moments of stress. "This is the very spot in which the old man and I did our digging. The hole that I uncovered is the one we plugged up nearly thirteen years ago. Here's our fortune, Nell, if the vein is what the old prospector thought it was."

Nell sat down tremblingly on the ground, the glittering lump of quartz in her hands. Her father chose a stone beside her, where he sat mopping his brow, unable to keep his eyes from the fascinating object which she held. Nell remained very thoughtful, very silent. She lifted her glance presently and cast it afar across Luckybug Creek at the reddish hills beyond.

"We're only a short distance from where we were camped that day when he appeared across the stream," she said.

"Yes, we were closer then than I realized," her father replied.

"Do you think, Daddy, that—that——" She floundered to a pause, afraid to voice her fears.

"Yes, I think the ledge is on Reading's claim," he answered her unfinished question. "Don't you remember he pointed out a tall, dead pine up this way, which he claimed was close to the southeast corner of his quarter-section?"

"Yes, I remember that."

Luckybug stood on his feet and pointed. "There it is," he told her. "You can just see the tip of it peeping over the brow of that chaparral-covered hill. The Luckybug Lode is well within the limits of his hundred-and-sixty, Nell."

"Then what shall we do, dear?" she asked pensively.

Her father brooded. "That," he replied finally, "is a mighty hard question to answer, Daughter. It'll take a lot of thinking."

"But the gold is his, not ours. It's on his land."

Luckybug smiled indulgently. "I'm afraid you don't quite understand the situation, Nell. The land isn't his yet. He's been squatting on it only about a year. And the land is on trial at that, as an agricultural proposition. But even if his homestead claim is finally allowed, he'll have to live on the land and improve it for two years more before he can get his patent."

"What is a patent, Daddy?"

"It's the best deed to a piece of real estate that a man can have," he explained. "It is the instrument by which title to public lands in the United States

is conveyed to an individual holder. A patent makes this land actually Reading's, without any strings attached.

"But he'll get his patent in time, won't he?"

Luckybug shrugged. "That remains to be seen," he said.

It was her turn to study the matter thoughtfully. Her broad brow puckered as her brain struggled with the unfamiliar problem.

"It seems to me," she ventured at length, "that the fact that he hasn't got his patent has little to do with this situation. He thinks of the land as his. He calls it Luckybug Ranch instead of Luckybug Homestead. He has every expectation of actually owning the property when the government requirements have been fulfilled. So anything and everything that is on the land is his. It will be when he has his patent, anyway, so theoretically it is his now. Am I not right?"

"To a certain extent you are," he told her. "And there has been many a bitter dispute, many a bloody fight over the question that you've brought up. But in the present case things are slightly different. You must remember that Reading has filed a homestead claim—squatted, rather, as the situation stands at present—in a section of the country which has been allocated by the government as mineral land. Therefore the prospector, in filing on a mining claim, has priority over the man who files on a homestead claim in such a district."

"And just what does that mean, please?" she asked, straightlipped.

"It means," he said carefully, "that we have a per-

fect right to file our mining claims on Reading's homestead. We would have that right even if Reading had succeeded in convincing the Secretary of Agriculture that his piece is more valuable as a farming tract than as mineral ground or forest land. In short, even if Reading's homestead claim had been allowed and he were a bona fide homesteader, we could file mining claims on his land and he couldn't legitimately raise a protest."

"Why, Daddy!" Her tone was of horror.

"That's how things stand," he informed her doggedly.

"But surely, Daddy, it isn't fair to Mr. Reading!"

Again her father shrugged. "We didn't make the law, my dear," he reminded her. "Young Reading took that chance when he filed on a homestead claim in a mineral district."

She cupped her round chin in her hand and looked away across the sunny hills once more. Then suddenly she stamped her foot a number of times.

"I hate the law!" she cried. "I hate it!"

Her father laughed. "That remark sounds familiar, Nell. I think I've made it myself on several occasions."

She rose to her feet and came close to him. Impulsively she threw her arms about his neck and nestled her head against his cheek.

"But we're not going to pay any attention to any old laws, are we, Daddy? We're going to play fair, aren't we?"

"We always try to play fair," he said soothingly, passing his hand lovingly over her glistening bobbed hair. "But how about Twain Reading? I under-

stood from what Old Man Hulette told me that this boy is a stickler for the law. We certainly ought to be justified in expecting him to back out gracefully, then, when the law that he holds in such high esteem happens to hand him the dirty end of the stick."

"Don't say law again!" she cried. " We don't need to have anything to do with the law. We can just go to Mr. Reading, tell him that we've found gold on his place, and—and——"

"Yes? You were working up a rather interesting little episode before you stopped. What's the climax, Nell?"

"Well, couldn't we offer to share with him? Wouldn't that be fair for both parties concerned? Fifty-fifty?"

"It sounds nice and Sunday-schooly," he laughed. "But I'm not ridiculing the idea at all. It's the natural, the logical, the equitable thing to do. And I may say that I am willing, if everything turns out right."

"And why shouldn't everything turn out right?" she wanted to know.

"That," he told her, "depends entirely on Twain Reading himself. If he turns out to be all that we hope he is—all that we now believe that he is—I think what you've suggested would be the only decent way to settle the matter. I'm not a hog, Nell. I'm perfectly willing, under the peculiar circumstances, to share with the boy. But he's got to be *there*. He's got to be *right* from the toes up."

"Oh, Daddy, I know he is! I just *know* it!"

"Yes, I know what it means when a woman 'just knows' a thing. She means she hopes and trusts it

is so, and is willing to bet that it *is* so. But that's merely intuition. Men demand more often to be shown the goods."

"But, Daddy, what are you afraid of? Surely he will be everlastingly grateful if you go to him and tell him that you know where there is gold on his land, and offer him a half-interest in the mine that is to be!"

"You forget, Nell, that Folsom Penitentiary is not so very far from where we're sitting now, and that I belong there, according to the law."

"All the better to have Twain Reading in with us then," she argued. "He could file on the mining claims in his own name, and the name of Painter, or our assumed name, need not appear in the transaction at all. Of course you two could have a private understanding between yourselves——"

"Beware of private understandings," Luckybug interrupted soberly.

Then he rose to his feet, kissed his daughter, and made ready to clamber down the hill to Luckybug Creek again.

"There's one thing certain," he cast back at her over his shoulder: "Whatever we do, we'll stake out our mining claims and file on 'em first, *then* study over what we had better do in regard to Reading."

"Daddy, aren't you showing just a little bit of suspicion and selfishness?"

"I hardly think so," he answered, unruffled. "But I'm more than twice as old as you are, Nell, have had more than twice the experience of life and men, and am consequently more than twice as cautious. We'll stake out our claims to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXII.

AT THE VERANDA STEPS.

When Nell and Luckybug reached the bald hill that looked down upon the ranch houses of Nancy's Dishpan they drew rein for a consultation concerning the menacing Mr. Laplace.

It was logical to believe that he had consummated his business at the ranch and taken his leave while they were on Luckybug Creek. Surely it would not require hours for him to contract to buy a few hundred hides, they reasoned. But since they could not be sure of this, they decided to gallop directly past the houses, giving them a wide berth, and into the timber beyond. There they would turn and ride back to the stables from the opposite direction, and, when they were free of their horses, cut across the fields toward home.

They carried out this scheme. Half an hour after they left the baldpate hill they were at the corrals and throwing off the saddles. They gave their ponies a perfunctory rub-down and turned them in. Nobody else was about. They hung their saddles on their accustomed pegs, and as they left the stable Nell caught sight of a runabout under a lean-to shed which sheltered wagons and implements and tools.

Was it Kenelm Laplace's car?

"It was so dark when I caught up the horses and saddled them this morning that I didn't notice it,"

said Luckybug. "If it's his, we're in for another period of dodging. Let's cut across to the cabin with as little fuss as possible."

Now and then they cast glances toward the huge log ranch house as they skirted a field of young barley and took up a beeline for home. But they saw nobody stirring. They rounded the first corner of the cabin, and were about to set foot on their little veranda, when a man came suddenly into view on the other side.

Simultaneously the three caught sight of one another. Recognition was instantaneous.

Kenelm Laplace carried in one hand a wet bathing suit. Apparently he had been to the swimming pool in Nine Mile Creek and, returning, was taking a short cut to the ranch house. He wore whipcord outing clothes, consisting of Norfolk jacket and bellows breeches, with russet-leather puttees neatly buckled about his calves.

Nell did her best to pretend that she had not recognized him, and tripped rapidly up the steps without a sidelong glance. Luckybug, however, realized that Laplace knew who they were. He realized, also, that to sham was little short of suicidal. He paused at the foot of the steps and prepared for the worst.

"Well, this is the biggest surprise of my young life!" chortled Laplace, hastening forward, round eyed, a peculiar smile on his lips. "Luckybug Painter and his daughter, or I'm absolutely dead! For the love of Mike, how come?"

"Hello, Mr. Laplace," Luckybug returned gravely, extending a hand perforce. "What on earth are you doing here?"

On the veranda Nell turned, with something of a sickly smile, to act the part her father had forced upon her.

"Goodness gracious!"—she tried to put astonishment in her tones—"is it really you, Mr. Laplace?"

"That's what I thought when I stepped around the corner of this cabin," he said whimsically, "but I'm not so sure of it after this pleasant shock. How are you, anyway, Luckybug? Say, isn't this rich?"

He wrung Luckybug's hand, then dropped it and leaped up the treads to the side of Nell.

When the handshaking was over he stood on the veranda, spread-legged, and surveyed them. His rather good-looking face was one big smile of greeting. He seemed as honest and sincere as Old Man Hulette himself.

"The Hulettes told me they had some vacationists renting one of their cabins," he said. "But if they mentioned the name it meant nothing to me. Or else I forgot it. And to think that they were talking about you folks! Say, I don't want to be a bromide, but it *is* a little world, isn't it? Tell me all about it, won't you? How on earth does it happen that I find you here? And what about The Luckybug, down in Puerta de Luna?"

"One question at a time, please," begged Luckybug, forcing a short laugh. "It's probably pleasanter here on the veranda than inside—I'll bring out chairs."

He went in and got them, and set them in a row. Then, with Laplace effervescing and Nell and her father sickeningly at a loss for words of welcome, they took their seats.

"I sold out down there shortly after you left, Mr. Laplace," Luckybug told him. "That business was all right for me while I was an old bachelor, but when I accidentally picked up a full-grown daughter I decided she was entitled to something better in life. So I sold the joint and brought Nelita to the United States."

"And so you've been here ever since?"

"Well, we traveled about a bit directly after leaving Mexico," was the evasive answer.

"Where are you living?"

"Here. We haven't any permanent headquarters. Home is wherever we take our hats off."

"Lord, I've thought about you two a thousand times!" glowed Laplace. "But I haven't had occasion to visit Puerta de Luna since I saw you there, so knew nothing about your change. Remember Con Gaslyn?"

This seemed a boyishly foolish question, but Luckybug answered readily enough that he did.

"Saw him last summer—on his ranch in New Mexico. I asked him about you people, and he said he hadn't heard anything more of you."

"And we haven't heard from him, either," Nell put in, thinking that she must say something. "He promised to write to Daddy, too."

"It's funny he didn't. That old boy's promise usually can be depended upon."

"How are things with you?" Luckybug asked, his thoughts so taken up with this new problem that he scarce realized what he had said.

"Oh, same old thing—buying up skins, as Miss Painter called them."

"You certainly cover a wide territory," Luckybug marveled.

"Yep—the entire West is my field."

"And to think," said Nell, "that your hide-buying should bring you to the very ranch where Daddy and I are spending our vacation! Have you been coming here for years, Mr. Laplace?"

It seemed to both his eager listeners that there was a period of undue hesitation before Laplace replied. And when he did make answer it was in the nature of an evasion.

"Well, I can hardly say 'for years,' Miss Painter. I was here last year, I remember." He looked admiringly at the handsome girl. "How have you managed to keep her so long, Luckybug?" he deliberately changed the subject.

"I have my own secret method," Luckybug almost growled. The inanity of the conversation was getting on his nerves.

Nell realized that she had failed. She ought to have asked the young man how many years he had been coming to Nancy's Dishpan, which question would not have allowed him an avenue of escape from a direct reply. Now she dared not broach the subject again. Her father's suspicions of this man were taking hold on her now. Why couldn't he have answered outright by telling just how many years he had been coming to the ranch? An honest man would have done that, she reasoned. People usually seem to take stupid delight in trying accurately to recall such data.

Luckybug was now positive that Laplace had not visited Nancy's Dishpan prior to the year before,

when, without a doubt he had come in the hope of getting track of them. This man was an accomplished actor. He had come seeking them now. He was extremely worried, in any event, over the possibility of Laplace referring to them as the Painters when he was again with the Hulettes. He decided upon a bold, swift, conclusive move.

He rose abruptly to his feet. "I've just thought of something that I've neglected, Nell," he said. "I ought to attend to it at once. Will you let my daughter entertain you, Mr. Laplace, while I look after this matter? I'm sure, though, that with Nelita to talk with you, you won't miss me in the slightest." (He had called his daughter Nelita twice instead of Nell for Mr. Laplace's particular benefit.) "I'll be back shortly"—and he went down the veranda steps and started toward the stables.

But he did not go to the stables. When he had veered in their direction until the corner of the cabin shut off Laplace's view of him, he changed course and walked directly to the ranch house.

In the big kitchen, as he had hoped, he found Her, fat and perspiring and working like a Trojan over the coming evening meal for fourteen hungry men.

"Mrs. Hulette," he asked, "can you spare me a few moments' time? I want to ask you some questions."

"Why, sure, Mr. Noble," she replied, and her gray eyes grew round and expectant. Few people ever came to this hard-working woman with any question of importance, much less such a personage as she considered Mr. Jerry Noble to be. She assumed a witness-stand attitude immediately, and seated her-

self ponderously, with a scared look which plainly said, "I knew there was something the matter the moment I saw his face in the doorway!"

"This hide-buyer," began Luckybug. "He's over at our cottage now, talking with Nell. How long have you known him, Mrs. Hulette?"

"Oh, I hope there's nothing wrong, Mr. Noble!" she gasped. "Surely Mr. Laplace is a perfect gentleman! He seems as kind and considerate, and——"

"Yes, I know. He undoubtedly is all that. But will you please let me know how long he has been coming to the ranch to buy hides?"

"Why, let me see." She crooked one toil-worn finger at her lips. "He's been here twice, now. Last spring and this spring."

Luckybug breathed a deep breath. "And you never saw him before last spring?"

"No, never heard of him before that. I remember he said when he was here first, though, that he might come back in the fall if he would be welcome, and there was a chance of goin' bear huntin' with Ed and th' boys. But he didn't."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hulette," said Luckybug. "That's about all I wanted to know."

"Mr. Noble, I just know there's something wrong! Tell me what has happened. What's he done?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Hulette. Nothing serious has happened. Please don't worry. It's merely this"—Luckybug hated to resort to subterfuge but could see no other way out—"it seemed to me that I have seen this fellow before some place. Please think no more about it."

He left her with deep lines of puzzlement on her honest, round face and stalked straight back to the cabin. His mind was settled now as to Laplace's business at Nancy's Dishpan. He was as sure as he was of anything in his experience that the young man was the brains back of Baptist Moxey; and that he had journeyed to the ranch to try to find out whether or not Nell and he had entered the country in search of the Luckybug Lode. And when a conviction had settled in the mind of Luckybug Painter he usually acted forthwith, according to his lights.

He would go straight to the cabin and have it out with the hide-buyer then and there—and let the best man win!

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN ACCIDENT.

THERE seemed to Luckybug, as he strode rapidly toward Nell and Laplace, seated on the little veranda of the cabin, that there was only one logical thing for him to do. That was to face Laplace and tell him that he knew why he had come to Nancy's Dishpan, and to warn him that, in attempting to work a scheme to dog the notorious Luckybug Painter into paying hush money as the price of his freedom, he was playing with fire.

There would be no beating about the bush. He would not permit Kenelm Laplace to feign surprise and make the claim that he had no idea of what Luckybug was talking about. Luckybug had taken it for granted that he would know. There would be no need to go into painful details. He would simply inform Laplace that he knew all about the game he was playing, and show him that he hadn't the slightest chance of winning.

But after the cat was out of the bag—what then? Nell and he could not afford to remain at Nancy's Dishpan. Laplace might realize that, so long as Luckybug knew his secret, he was beaten from the start. Then he might, in a spirit of revenge, tell the prison authorities what he knew.

Luckybug suddenly slowed his steps. Careful reconsideration of the matter now caused him to won-

der if he was acting wisely in not playing the game as this fellow played it. That is, resort to pretense and secrecy, and not let him know that he was under suspicion. Laplace would do nothing, anyway, until after the claims had been filed upon. More than that, he would not do anything until the mining venture had been launched, and profits were beginning to show.

Luckybug had decided in his own mind, riding home with Nell that day, that the decent thing to do would be to take Twain Reading into partnership. All his life he had been taking chances on men and, when all was said and done, he was not afraid to take a chance on Reading. It was Nell and Reading's sudden and indisputable liking for each other that worried him most. A partnership would throw these two into close contact, perhaps a daily contact; and Luckybug was not ready yet to give his daughter into the keeping of another man. He had had only a year and a half of her—he wanted more before surrendering her to a lover's arms.

Now, however, he would be obliged to risk that, too. He would go to Reading to-morrow, tell him about the gold, and arrange with him to make filings on the claims. His name, neither that of Painter nor Noble, would not appear on the papers at all. He would throw himself upon Reading's mercy and trust to him for a square deal. He would tell the young man everything, in order that he might be spared the shock of hearing that his partner was an escaped convict in the event that Laplace should strike when the mines had been put on a paying basis. Laplace would not strike before the mines

were established and running smoothly. And before he did, Nell and her father could be on their way around the world again—wanderers once more. Or they would live somewhere abroad, trusting Reading to send them their share of the profits from the Luckybug Lode, leaving their fortune in his hands. Better that than the great gray walls of the penitentiary! Unless—unless Reading had claimed Nell in the meantime! Then he—Luckybug—would become a lone wanderer over the face of the earth.

Luckybug was bitter as he walked on slowly. It looked as if he might get the worst of it no matter how things turned out.

With his plans completely changed, then, he stepped upon the little veranda and entered into the lax conversation of Laplace and Nell. And presently, to the great relief of the Painters, She pounded upon the triangle over at the ranch house, and Laplace arose and answered the call to supper. He said in taking his leave that he would be driving to Sacramento early the following morning, and bade them good-by, and hoped that he might meet them at Nancy's Dishpan the following season.

Then he went swinging toward the ranch house, and Nell burst into tears from the strain.

As they watched him depart Luckybug said to his daughter: "There is no doubt in my mind as to his business here. But if it should turn out that we are mistaken he'll certainly tell the Hulettes to-night that their renters are old acquaintances of his. And he'll mention the name of Painter. So if we hear nothing after he's gone about the discrepancy in

names, we can rest assured that Laplace kept his own counsel. That will prove he's crooked."

It was about nine o'clock the following morning that a shelf of loose rock and dirt gave way underneath Luckybug's horse as they were on the trail to Reading's homestead. Nell was riding behind, and her horse reared back from the edge of the break just in time, while her father and his mount went rolling over and over down a steep slope to the bottoms of Luckybug Creek. Halfway down the struggling man managed to disengage himself from the saddle, but not before the horse had rolled over him twice. The horse plunged on and splashed in a deep pool of water. But Luckybug lay silent and immovable halfway up the slope, one knee upraised, both arms flung wide in a lifeless attitude.

The girl contrived to turn her frantic pony in the narrow trail. She raced him back to a zigzag cañon that gave access to the creek below. They slid down in a shower of dirt and stones and galloped to where her father's horse, snorting with fright and indignation, was struggling to dry land.

Nell flung herself from the saddle, and, holding a hand over her wildly thumping heart, fought her way up the steep slope to her father's side.

She cried out with relief as, upon drawing nearer to him, she heard a low moan from his lips, and saw that he was trying to rise. Next instant she was on her knees before him and had her arms about him.

He looked sick and white, but gave her a hopeful smile which was more of a grimace.

"Gosh Almighty!" he breathed. "How far did the earthquake spread?"

"Daddy, are you badly hurt?"

"H'm-m! Haven't hardly had time to find out yet. Left arm feels funny—dead. And I think the saddle horn punched me in the ribs a couple of times. How's the horse?"

"Alive, anyway—I didn't stop to look. Oh, Daddy! Tell me you're not badly hurt!"

Using his right hand, and with her aid, he managed a sitting posture. His left arm dangled.

"Busted," he remarked nonchalantly, looking down at it. "And at least two ribs caved in."

"Oh, Daddy!"

He looked up at her and smiled, but his lips were the color of clay from pain.

"Don't let little things like this worry you," he said. "I've had more than this happen to me and been obliged to keep on fighting. Now all I've got to do is get on my horse and ride back to Nancy's Dishpan."

"Daddy, can I do anything at all for you?"

"Help me down to the floor of the cañon," he told her. "Then get some sticks, cut off a saddle string, and tie my arm up rigid. Can you ride bareback as far as the ranch, Nell?"

"Oh, easily. I don't mind it at all. I used to lots on Mr. Gaslyn's ranch."

"Then if you'll take off your saddle cinch and use it and the latigo straps, you can strap up my ribs with them so it won't jolt me so much to ride."

She helped him to his feet and together they slid and stumbled on down to the creekside. Here she busied herself as he had directed, while Luckybug,

with his upper teeth set in his lower lip, looked over his horse.

"The son-of-a-gun is hardly scratched," he announced, after leading the animal forward a few steps. "I wouldn't have been, either, if I could have gotten my feet out of the stirrups sooner. Well, we're not so badly off. I'll be about in a few days, after a doctor has set my arm properly. There's nothing to worry about. I can ride slowly, too, if my ribs are well strapped."

"Daddy, we're much nearer to Mr. Reading's homestead than we are to Nancy's Dishpan. I say we try to get down there. And you can stay there till I've brought a doctor."

"I don't want to impose on the boy," he replied. "He has little enough room. And you may not be able to get a doctor before to-morrow. I haven't the slightest notion as to where one can be found."

"We're going there, anyway," said his daughter decisively. "Please let me run things now, Daddy! You've been boss all along. It's my turn, I think."

"All right," he gave in. "To be frank with you, I don't stand a battering up so well as I did ten years ago. I'm feeling a good deal of pain all over right now. Let's go to Reading's, if you think best."

She tied the splints on his arm, and with all her strength strapped up his ribs with the latigos and cinch. Then she hid her saddle in the brush and helped him to mount. With a graceful leap she reached the bare back of her own horse, and they set off down the creekbed for Luckybug Ranch.

When they came out in the open and the cabin was in sight, Twain Reading, who was grinding an

ax beside his stable, looked up and saw them coming. He seemed to realize at once that something was amiss, for he dropped the tool and began striding rapidly toward them.

"Well, well! What's all this about?" he called as the little cavalcade drew near. "Broken arm, eh?" (He had noticed the splints.) "And ribs busted, too! What does the other fellow look like, Mr. Noble?"

Nell sprang down when Reading had led them to the door of his cabin. She and the homesteader helped Luckybug to the ground, and Reading led him inside. In one corner of the room stood his bed, a simple affair made of fir boughs. On it he made Luckybug sit down, and then he lifted his legs, swung him around, and eased him to a prone position.

"Now, Miss Noble," he said, turning to the girl, "there isn't any whisky in this cabin because, while I personally don't object to the use of intoxicating liquors, I believe in strict observance of my country's laws. If the Eighteenth Amendment were repealed you'd find a bottle in my cupboard, but so long as it remains in effect there'll not be a drop of booze under my roof. That's that, then. And all that I can do is to ask you to make your father as comfortable as possible on nothing, while I ride to Nine Mile and telephone for a doctor. I'm sorry. Half a dozen shots of whisky—even moonshine—would do Mr. Noble a world of good. But I didn't make the law.

"Well, I'm off. The sooner that arm is properly set and the ribs strapped up scientifically the better it'll be for him. You can tell me what happened

when I get back. I won't be gone two hours. Make yourself at home. Cook anything you can find."

He bustled out of the door, and in a few minutes Nell heard the clattering of the gray's hoofs as he leaped across the level land toward the mouth of the trail to Nine Mile.

Luckybug had dropped into a restless sleep. He moaned softly now and then.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT FOUR IN THE AFTERNOON.

It was the day following the accident on the trail. The doctor had come and gone. Much painful prodding had revealed two broken ribs in Luckybug's torso. He was strapped up tight with wide bands of adhesive tape. The break in his arm was not complicated; it had been quickly and neatly set, and the owner of it now carried it in a sling.

But the medical man had given strict orders that there be no horseback riding until the ribs were knitting satisfactorily. In a week, perhaps, Luckybug might be able to walk to Nine Mile without injury. There he could get some conveyance to carry him on to Nancy's Dishpan. But in the meantime—"nothing doing!" He was an old-timer, this doctor of the hills, gruff, good-natured, and set in his convictions; and the most important of these was that a doctor should be obeyed.

"Well," remarked Luckybug, as Reading came in and stood grinning at him from the doorway, "I've wished myself onto you, all right."

"Now, listen," said the homesteader sternly: "Let's not have any palaver about that, Mr. Noble. You know you're welcome. I couldn't have expected you two to accept an invitation to spend a week with me because of the poor accommodations I have to offer. But I'm tickled to death when you're forced

to stay. We can make out fine. I've plenty of bedding, which is the main thing. If I haven't, I can soon get more by riding to Nancy's Dishpan. You sleep here in the living room. Your daughter says she will be content on a straw shakedown in the kitchen. I'll blink up at the stars outside under my old live oak. Not a word, now!"—as Luckybug opened his mouth to protest. "You know I'll like it. Whoever heard of a cowpuncher that didn't? You like it yourself! Your unspoken objections, then, are out of order. The matter is closed."

There followed for the crippled man a week of restfulness. He sat in Reading's cane rocking chair under the spreading live oak that roofed the space before the cabin like a canopy, reading books and magazines of ancient vintage. He lay on his bed a great deal of the time, looking up at the crude rafters of the cabin and speculating on the intricacies of life —his own life in particular. He walked about frequently, but never far from the shack; sat for hours beside the musical waterfall smoking cigars and cigarettes and idly flipping pebbles into the clear, deep pool with his working arm. He tossed bread crumbs to the leaping trout. He watched the mud turtles and water dogs engaged in their daily task of living.

And through it all he refused to be self-centered. He almost became angry when Nell or Reading purposed to stay with him and keep him company. He insisted in their riding away together, or being together somewhere away from him, while they learned each other and wrestled with the old, old situation. It seemed to his philosophical mind that

Fate had taken the reins from his hands. No more would he interfere. Nature would have her way. All about him he saw her irrevocable workings. As well to stand beneath the waterfall and try to stay its rushing with his outstretched arms as to interfere with her world-old schedules.

Meantime Nell and Reading played and worked together. She held fence posts plumb while he threw in dirt and tamped it. She drove staples into the yielding wood while he stretched wire. He was plowing with a borrowed team. She drove while he "shook" the plow in virgin soil that was obstinately rocky and tough with a network of roots. She drove the team hitched to a "go-devil," a home-made implement that raked up sage and chaparral bushes which the mattock had loosened from the ground. Together they pitched the accumulated brush in piles and fired it in the calm of evening, when the flames leaped straight upward toward the heavens and lighted the barriers of the forest that stood about the clearing.

Or, when toil became too irksome, they mounted their horses and explored the country round about.

Then came a golden day when they sat their saddles on a wind-swept hill and gazed far off to the ice-cream cones which were the mysterious Sierra peaks, wrapped in purest snow and purest silence. And from their horses' feet the land shot down in rock-ribbed shelves and timbered slopes to the bosom of the green American as it romped along to the romantic blue Pacific. Twain's arm went about the waist of the girl beside him, and he half

drew her from the saddle and kissed her upon responsive lips.

Below them in the trees red-breasted linnets sang. Grave towhees chirped in the chaparral close by. Gray ground squirrels chattered, and a falcon hung motionless in the air above their heads. A low, hushed murmuring floated gently up from the racing river.

Nell's horse reached out appraisingly lipping at a bunch of grass. The silence was broken by the girl's tiny scream. But the man gathered her closer and touched her horse's side with the toe of his boot. The horse stepped out from under her entirely, leaving her hanging in his arms.

With powerful muscles he lifted her to a new position, one arm supporting her back, the other wrapped about her knee. And there he held her on his saddle-horn, a willing captive, close to his breast, and kissed her again and again before they had spoken one brief word of love. For words were useless things, designed for those who wished to gossip or quarrel or argue, or ask for bread or money—but not for those who loved.

"Nell, there never was another girl like you," he told her tremulously at last. "I've loved you since the first time I spoke to you, that day in camp on Luckybug Creek. That seems years ago—and it seems that I have loved you always."

Nell said nothing, but hid her flushed face against his breast. Her kiss had told him that she loved him. She was too ashamed of her ready surrender to add words to the token she had given him. She felt his trembling as he held her closer and closer. He knew

that she had given herself to him. Somehow she believed that he would ask for no other sign.

There was no talk of his poverty as opposed to the comfortable circumstances which her father had made for her. He had no apologies to offer, no regrets. He had won her, and now he claimed his prize. He was too proud to minimize what he had to offer her. Which was only love and the manly work that he could do toward making a successful future for them. He loved her and she loved him. That was all that mattered in the universe. But——

"Are you happy?" he asked at last.

"Yes," she whispered. "Happier than I've ever been before."

That was all. He drew her close again. Their lips were pressed together in a lingering kiss. Then he lifted her one side and lowered her by the hands gently to the ground. She mounted silently, and silently they rode back side by side and hand in hand toward the little cabin down by the white-maned waterfall.

"Shall we tell your father at once?" he asked, as the narrowness of the trail forced their horses into single file.

"I suppose so," she answered. "But—but it's going to hurt him, Twain. You see—— There's something we haven't told you. Something you must know soon. Daddy and I haven't known each other long. We never saw each other in our lives until about a year and a half ago. He—he was away when I was born, and we didn't get together for over twenty years. We'd lost track of each other. So you see—we've been pretty dear to each other since

we met. It's a long story—Daddy must tell it to you. I—I shouldn't have given in to you, Twain. I—but I couldn't help myself."

* * * * * *

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when Nell and Twain Reading were riding down the winding trail to the cabin on Luckybug Creek. In the cabin Nell's father was lying on the bed, reading a book of Schopenhauer's pessimistic essays, and he was so nearly asleep that the significance of the printed words was halfway lost to him.

He had felt for several minutes an unexplainable irritability, which his half-slumbering condition failed to soothe. It was as if he were dreaming, with his fanciful subconscious mind struggling between a dream of peacefulness and a tormenting nightmare. He could not account for his restlessness, for neither his broken arm nor his bound-up ribs were paining him just then. It was as if he desired greatly to sleep and somebody or something was creating a slight disturbance near that made restful sleep impossible. It seemed sometimes that eyes were watching him, and that this was the telepathic reason for his lack of ease.

Then suddenly the strain departed and he dropped into deeper slumber.

When he awoke, perhaps two minutes later, it was with a decided start of apprehension. His wellbeing seemed strangely threatened. He was wide awake in an instant, with his mental faculties totally alert. But inured as he was to danger, reason cautioned him immediately to make no move other than to slowly turn his head. And slowly, as he turned it on

the pillow, the indistinct figure of a human being crept into his range of vision.

It was the figure of a man. He wore no hat, and his hair was cropped close to his nutlike head. He wore a suit of denim which had faded with repeated laundering. The shoes on the feet of this character were brogans.

The back of the man was toward him—a broad back, a little bent. Above his head the man's hands were reaching, and generous portions of his white arms were showing above the wrists as the sleeves crept down.

Noiselessly big fingers turned the catch of the cupboard door. As noiselessly the door swung open.

Then Luckybug sensed that the man was turning his face to make sure that he was still asleep. He closed his eyes and waited until a tiny sound told him that the intruder was again engaged with whatever task had brought him there.

Again Luckybug watched him. He took down the remains of a beef roast, which Reading had brought behind his saddle from Nancy's Dishpan the day before. There was part of a loaf of pan bread, such as outlanders make hastily when the system is crying for food.

These the thief set on a chair beside the cupboard. Once more he cast a glance of alarm toward Luckybug, but before he could turn his head the prone man's eyes were closed. Luckybug heard him moving stealthily about, and when again he looked he saw him gathering together old clothes of Reading, including a battered hat, a pair of corduroy trousers, and a shirt with the sleeves cut down to halves. He

wrapped these garments about the meat and bread; and while he was thus engaged Luckybug edged cautiously toward the board wall against which his bed was set, and with his right hand jerked down a cartridge belt that dangled from a nail. The belt was reeved through a leather holster, and in the holster was a Colt six-shooter, caliber .45.

One dexterous flip and the weapon was out of its leather holder and in the old gunman's hand. The sound of the weapon plunking on the bed had warned the daylight burglar, but before he could leap away in flight or charge the man on the bed, Luckybug, was coolly looking at him over the sights of the heavy Colt.

"Take it easy, my friend," said Luckybug softly. "I'm not going to plug you. I threw down on you only to make sure that you'd stay put while I say what I have to say. If I'd spoken to you to let you know I was awake, you might have bolted through the door. Then I wouldn't have had a chance to speak to you. Step over there between me and the window, please. The sun has dropped behind a hill; the light is dim in here. I want to see your face."

The man obeyed without a word, backing into the position that Luckybug had ordered him to take.

The face that the better light revealed was scarred and bore a predatory look. The nose was negroid, the lips puckered and thick. The eyes, slate-blue, were small and scared and held a hunted look. Above them the eyebrows were inordinately thin. A stubble of beard showed on the dirty face.

"When did you crush out?" Luckybug asked casually.

The slitted eyes darted a look of fright and understanding.

"Come—talk fast!" the master of the situation advised. "The owner of this cabin will be here shortly."

"D'ye savvy, boss?"—it was a husky croak of horror.

"I savvy," was the answer.

"Six days ago, I t'ink it was—maybe only five. I'm all mixed up. Mister, I'm starvin'. Honest, I am, Mister. Youse wouldn't—wouldn't toin me down f'r a little grub, would youse?"

"You may take with you the grub you have when you go," said Luckybug. "The clothes, too. I'll figure out a way to explain their loss. Are they after you?"

"Dey was, fer a little. I hoid de houn's t'ree days ago. But I beat it up de cricks an' lost 'em. W'ere am I, Mister? I don't savvy how to beat it outa dese jungles. I been wanderin' aroun' fer days an' couldn't get no grub. I seen sev'ral houses, but I didn't dast show meself. I'm pretty near nutty, Mister. Youse wouldn't toin me in, would youse? I never done nuttin' to youse, did I, sir?"

"I am not going to turn you in," Luckybug promised him. "I have a broken arm and two crushed ribs, and couldn't very well handle you. But you know what it means for a person to aid an escaped convict. Come here."

The man shuffled toward him, suspicious of such treatment, wary, ready to bolt if a good chance offered.

"When you leave this ranch, walk up the creek for half a mile and watch carefully for a trail that runs due south, almost. That's south—that way. Keep to the trail till it leads you to the highway. Then you'll have to watch out for yourself. Travel east, and travel only after dark. Take the grub you have there, and the clothes. Burn your prison clothes when you've put those on. They'll fit you pretty well. Look over there on the wall. Do you see that pair of chaps—leather riding pants?"

"Yes, Mister."

"In the right-hand pocket you'll find a purse with about fifty dollars in it. Go get it."

The escaped convict almost ran as he crossed the floor, dug into the pocket of the chaps, and twisted out the well-filled purse.

"Take that and the grub and the clothes and run," said Luckybug. "And if you're caught, be a man and don't tell anybody that I helped you."

"Boss, I won't—honest to God! I'll let 'em——"

"Beat it!" Luckybug cut in. "The man who'll be here shortly would probably never speak to me again if he knew what I've done. Good-by—good luck!"

The man grabbed up the food about which the old clothes were wrapped and darted for the door. But there he paused, drew back, glanced helplessly at his benefactor.

"Great Gawd!" he breathed. "Dere's a guy an' a goil ridin' here now!"

"Out through the kitchen door!" cried Luckybug. "Your only chance. Keep the cabin between yourself and them and run like hell!"

With the breath rattling in his throat from fatigue and fright and deprivation, the man slithered awkwardly across the living room and out into the sunshine through the kitchen door.

CHAPTER XXV.

LIBERTY AT STAKE.

Painfully Luckybug drew himself to a sitting position on the bed and managed to hang the cartridge belt and six-shooter on the nail in the wall above it. A few moments of waiting followed, while he listened to the faint beating of horses' hoofs outside. Then came a shout, and the hoofbeats quickened to a clatter of sounds like the sudden beating of a drum, as a horse gathered himself and leaped toward top speed from a casual walk.

Luckybug groaned and lay back in bed. He had failed. There was nothing now that he could do but to pretend sleep—to pretend that he had been asleep while the hunted man had rifled the cabin.

Nell did not come to the door. Only one horse had leaped away in pursuit of the running fugitive, but Nell had probably stopped in her tracks and was wonderingly watching the chase.

Two minutes passed, four—five. Then came the thudding of hoofs once more, drawing ever nearer. He heard the voice of Reading in a low, stern command. He heard Nell's breathless questioning, though her words were not distinguishable.

Then the door, which the convict had closed, was opened suddenly; and Luckybug had just time to place a warning finger to his lips when the captured

man came in, a lariat about his middle, incasing his arms at his sides.

Twain Reading followed at the other end of the lariat. With a feigned start Luckybug looked up, rubbed his eyes.

"What's all the row?" he asked sleepily. "Who's that with the rope around him?"

"Just a straggler that I dropped my noose over, Mr. Noble," Reading answered in somewhat of a lofty air. "He was getting away with the remains of our dinner, which remains were designed for our supper, some old rags of mine, and a purse full of money that he must have swiped from you here in the cabin. Have you been asleep?

"Gosh, but I was scared when I saw him loping up the creek," he continued breathlessly, without waiting for a reply. "I thought perhaps he'd slugged you, Mr. Noble. Look at the clothes he wears. Recognize 'em?"

Luckybug only looked sleepily puzzled.

"Convict uniform," Reading explained. "This bird has escaped from Folsom Prison. But he's going back to-morrow."

Then Nell, white faced, came in and stood against one wall with her hands behind her, gazing wonderingly from her father to the sullen man who stood immovable in the middle of the room.

"I heard several days ago," Reading was saying, "that a prisoner had escaped. The entire country round about here has been on the lookout for him. It's a nuisance that I should be the one to pick him up. Guess I'll have to herd him to Nine Mile this evening to get him off our hands. From there I can

telephone to the penitentiary. It won't take them long to come in a machine. Can you suggest anything else to do with him, Mr. Noble?"

Luckybug looked thoughtful. "You might feed him," he said. "He looks sort of hungry."

"Yes, maybe he is. He was getting away with the last scrap of meat in the house. Sit down at the table, you, and I'll give you something to eat. When did you last have the nose-bag on?"

"I ain't had nuttin' to eat fer pretty near four days, Mister," whined the man. "I'm starvin'—honest!"

"Well, throw your feet under the table there. I'll feed you."

Twain Reading tossed to Luckybug the purse that he had taken away from his prisoner. Then as the man sat down bashfully he busied himself at placing food before him.

"I'll make him some coffee, Twain," suggested Nell.

Reading frowned. "Don't coddle him too much," he advised righteously. "Too much coddling ruins these fellows."

Luckybug remained on the bed, his eyes fixed on the ceiling while the prisoner wolfed down the food that had been set before him. Nell watched her father carefully. She knew just about how his mind was running, and, being a woman, was in sympathy with his thoughts.

When the prisoner had eaten his fill and had gulped down three cups of Nell's hastily made coffee Reading began to fidget as he raised the fourth cup to his lips.

"Make it snappy," he commanded. "It's growing late. It'll be midnight, maybe, before I get back home, as it is."

Then it was that Luckybug squirmed about until he was sitting in an upright position on the edge of the bed. He cast a swift glance at his daughter, then cleared his throat and addressed himself to the homesteader.

"Look here, Twain," he said, "don't you think you're going out of your way to send this fellow back to prison?"

Reading turned his head and stared at him with round eyes. "Going out of my way!" he repeated. "Of course I am. Do you imagine that I like the job?"

"Then why not drop it? Let the man go and struggle for his liberty with those who are paid to catch him. He hasn't harmed you, has he? Why butt in?"

"Why, Mr. Noble! You surprise me! Don't you realize that it is my duty as a citizen to make an effort to return this predatory animal to confinement?"

"Bunk!" scoffed Luckybug. "Be human, can't you?—and work off your excess ardor as a citizen in trying to get laws passed which will give the offender against society a square deal. Listen, my son—the days of punishment for criminals are about over. What most of them need is doctoring, not punishment. Two-thirds of them drift into a life of crime by reason of environment or some peculiar mental twist which should make them subjects for a psychologist rather than wards of the state. You

don't know what influences were brought to bear on this man to make him commit a crime and be imprisoned. Maybe he was railroaded to the pen. Maybe he was the scapegoat for some one higher up. Maybe he knew something about some person of influence, and was put away to silence him. Who made you his judge? He came for food to keep himself from starving to death. When all is said and done, my boy, you don't even *know* that he is an escaped convict. If I were you I'd let him go on his way, and——"

"And thereby aid and abet a criminal in escaping from the punishment which the courts have ruled that he shall suffer!" Reading interrupted hotly.

"You seem mighty keen for punishing people," Luckybug said calmly. "Don't you think there's enough punishment on earth without you adding your bit? Life itself is a punishment. You were kind to that horse you broke. You didn't punish him because he didn't understand what you wanted him to do. Maybe this fellow doesn't understand what society requires of him."

"Then punishment will make him understand!"

Luckybug shook his head. "It seldom if ever works out that way," he argued.

Twain Reading threw wide his hands in disgust. "You're a weak sentimentalist!" he accused. "Then you want our prisons abolished, do you? You want dangerous criminals to have their freedom, to roam at large and prey on honest folks. You——"

"There are no honest folks," Luckybug cut in softly. "Every day of our lives we so-called honest folks break some fool law. Now, be sensible, Twain.

Until we know more of this big subject, of course we can't abolish our prisons. We can't afford to allow dangerous criminals to go free and kill and plunder right and left. My point is merely this: That you, with your kindly ways, ought to be above electing yourself to run this man back to the penitentiary. Why constitute yourself his judge? He committed a crime—or at least was sent up as an offender against the law. But there is a stronger law than the one he was forced to bow to. That law is the law of nature, of self-preservation, of self-defense. It made this man escape from prison. Maybe he's innocent of the crime with which he was charged—we don't know. But even if he committed the crime and was sent to the penitentiary, instead of to an institution where the peculiarities of his mental equipment could be studied to find out why he committed the crime, isn't he justified in making his escape if a chance is offered?"

"He is not! He ought to remain in prison until he has served out his sentence, and come out repentant to begin life over again."

"Would you be content to take the medicine you have prescribed for him?"

"If I had committed a crime, yes."

"You're talking through your hat! You'd escape at the first opportunity. At least, nine men out of ten would. You may be a fool, but I hardly think you are. If there was any repenting to be done, any beginning life over again, you'd consider that you could attend to that outside the penitentiary better than you could inside. Every man yearns for freedom, Twain. Doesn't almost every accused man put

up as stiff a fight as he can to keep from going to prison? Then why should he not try to escape after he has been sent there? Let him fight his own battle with the law and with himself. You are too fine a man to interfere. Let the coarse-grained fellows who deliberately choose the job of handling convicts and bringing them back when they escape 'tend to this fellow's case. I can tell you frankly, right now, that if you are the means of this man's being returned to prison you will lower yourself in my esteem a good many notches."

Twain Reading's eyes were flashing fanatically. "You're a fine citizen, you are!" he cried bitterly. "This man has robbed you of a purse filled with money while you slept——"

The thump of the purse on the table at the convict's elbow, as Luckybug tossed it across the room, interrupted the homesteader's impassioned outburst.

"Take it," he ordered the man. "Put it in your pocket. You'll need a grubstake on the road."

"But he's not going on the road!" roared Reading, his face red with anger. "He's going back to prison before midnight."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Luckybug, his lips setting tight. "I gave him that money. I had already given it to him before you came. I told him to take the grub and the clothes, intending to explain matters to you later. I directed him how to find the mouth of your trail to the highway."

"Then you weren't asleep when he came! You were helping him to get away?"

Luckybug nodded. "I know," he said, "how

sweet is liberty. And my creed is, 'Judge not that ye be not judged.'"

"Then you have no respect whatever for the law, Mr. Noble?" Reading's tones were a plea.

"I prefer not to commit myself on that broad subject," said Luckybug. "I have lived longer than you have. I've lived more intensely than you have. I know men better than you do. I would consider it beneath my dignity to return this man to prison. His life is his own. I would let him live it until he interferes seriously with me.

"For all we know, this man may be only a political prisoner—sent up for being a pacifist when the country was seething with war indignation. Surely you must know that many honest and law-abiding citizens, who happened not to have the same views of war as the majority of the people, were thrown into prison unjustly during that assinine period, and have not been pardoned, now that we are partially sane again! All over the country the people are clamoring for the release of such prisoners, but the government lends a sluggish ear."

"This man looks like a thug," said Reading briefly.

"You don't know, perhaps, how prison life changes a man's appearance," pleaded Luckybug. "It will stamp a gargoyle expression on the face of an Adonis in time. The deadly monotony, the soul-destroying torture will make the most placid-faced man look like a monster, Twain."

Reading stood up. "Well," he said clickingly, "you and I look at this matter from an entirely different viewpoint. There is no use in argument. I will do my duty as a citizen as I see it, and you

may think about me any way you choose. This man is going to start on his way to Folsom right now."

"Wait!" urged Luckybug, and there was a deadly calmness in his voice. "I want to warn you, Twain, that you scarcely know who you are dealing with when you use such a tone to me. You are only a boy. I am a man, deeply experienced in life. I am not, perhaps, just the sort of man that you think I am. This fellow's liberty is at stake. I cannot permit your inexperience to ride down my maturer judgment. Don't try to take him back. I'm mighty serious, Twain."

With burning eyes and set lips, Twain grabbed up the lariat which he had thrown from the prisoner's body when he told him to sit at the table. With long determined strides he crossed the room and raised his hands to drop the spread noose over the man's shoulders again.

Then Nell cried out as her father pitched backward on the bed, reached up and jerked down the forty-five, and struggled erect once more, leveling the weapon at her lover just as he turned his head to discover why the girl had screamed.

"Reading," said Luckybug in a cold, hard voice, "take that rope off his shoulders and go and sit down in that chair over there in the corner."

"Mr. Noble!" gasped Reading in absolute amazement. "Are you crazy? Do you realize that you are threatening me with that gun?"

"I am not crazy," came the cold reply. "I realize that I am threatening you with this gun. Do what I told you to, or I'll show you the most extraordinary example of marksmanship with a Colt revolver that

you ever saw. You'd better believe me, kid. I can clip three buttons off your shirt before you can jump back. You've bumped against a bad one disguised as a mild-mannered gentleman. Ask Nell!"

"Oh, Twain!" came piteously from the girl. "He'll do it! He'll do it! Don't disobey him, Twain—for my sake!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"I LOVE HIM!"

With an expression that was almost imbecile, so astounded was he, Twain Reading threw the lariat noose from the convict's shoulders and dragged his feet to the corner chair. He sat down, gazing from Nell to Luckybug like one who has just awakened from a dream.

"I'm sorry, Twain," came Luckybug's calm tones, "that it was necessary for me to throw down on you. If I had two good arms and no ribs caved in I would have put you in that corner without resorting to a forty-five. Now listen: I'm running things here for the present. Make one move to stop what I'm going to do and I'll lead you up. I'll put your arm in a sling for you, or I'll graze your temple with a bullet and put you out. I'll stop you if you attempt to stop me—remember that. I may lose your friendship, but I mean to have my way—which is the way of a more experienced man and a better man than you are."

He cast a glance at the white-faced prisoner. "Take that purse, what's left of the grub, and the clothes," he ordered, "and hit the trail. I'll steady this righteous upholder of the law until you're in the clear. Beat it!"

With fumbling fingers the man in denim scraped together the victuals and the garments, dropped the

purse into a pocket, and slunk out through the kitchen without a word. Twain Reading sat with lips compressed and daggers glinting in his eyes, but there was something strange about this new Mr. Noble that had suddenly been revealed to him which told him it would be disastrous to raise a protest.

"Nell"—Luckybug turned to his daughter—"go outside, please, and throw the saddles off the horses. Turn them loose, slap them on the rump, and scare 'em away from the cabin, so they won't be easily caught."

"Daddy, I——"

"Do that, please," said Luckybug; and the "please" did not deceive her into believing that his utterance was not a command.

Never before had he commanded her to do anything. There had been no necessity for commands in the placid and understanding life that they had lived together. She had never seen her father like this before—so cool, so deadly in earnest, so unopposable. Without another murmur she moved noiselessly through the doorway to do his bidding.

Reading and Luckybug were silent until she had returned. Luckybug, though not exactly regretting his deliberate act, was cooling off to the extent that he realized he had placed his daughter and himself in a delicate and embarrassing position.

They were Reading's guests, partaking of his hospitality. And Luckybug had forced their host, at the point of a six-shooter, to sit in the corner like an unruly little boy.

When Luckybug's horse rolled down the slope with him, Nell and he had been on their way to Luckybug

Ranch to tell the squatter that they had found gold on his claim, and to offer him the opportunity to coöperate with them in exploiting the discovery. At first the accident had excluded everything else from their minds. After they had settled down to a daily routine on the homestead, Luckybug had refrained from bringing up the subject, hoping that the constant contact would give him a better insight into Reading's character before taking the young man into his confidence.

Now it seemed, after the unpleasantness that had just occurred, that to remain under the squatter's roof would be simply out of the question. Also Reading's attitude toward the miserable man fleeing from the hounds of the law made Luckybug feel that to unburden his heart to him would be little short of suicidal to his future. No, Twain Reading must never find out the deep-seated sympathy which was back of the tolerance that had placed Luckybug on the convict's side. Reading, with his Puritanical upbringing, could never understand, even though Luckybug dared tell him, the demoralizing effect of prison life. Reading didn't know that prisons often made conscienceless criminals of many who were sent there for offenses not so heinous. He was helpless to tell what he knew from bitter experience to be true. So Reading could not know why he, of all men, would be the last to send a fellow being back into the toils from which he had escaped.

Nell had reëntered the cabin and shrunk against the wall. Her face was almost tragic under the stress of her emotion. She and the man she loved had been on their way to the cabin to tell her father

that they had given themselves to each other—and a quarrel had sprung up before one word could be said about the new happiness that had come into her life.

The difficult part of the situation was that she wanted to be loyal to both of them. She loved Twain; she loved her father. She sympathized with the wretched escaped convict; she was in sympathy with her father's attitude toward him, for she knew that he had been through the grinding mill and had suffered grievously. She admired Twain for his strict adherence to what he believed to be right and just. She couldn't understand how a man so kind and tender and considerate as he had shown himself to be could be so intolerant and anxious to punish a fellow human being. He loved horses and was kindness itself to them. He communed with the wild life in the woods, even studied and sympathized with lowly lizards and mudpuppies, with no thought of harming them or ending their brief careers with his bootheel or a stone. "Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn," kept running through her thoughts as she stood there, agitated to the core of her, watching the two men and wondering helplessly what was to be the final outcome of this sudden misunderstanding.

It was her father who broke the portentous silence.

"Well," he remarked, with an expression of bitterness on his face, "that seems to be that." He had already tossed the revolver behind him on the bed. "I suppose I did a silly thing, Reading; but, in my helpless condition, I could think of no other way to gain my point. Would it be sillier still for me to apologize?"

"I think it would be, Mr. Noble," Twain returned, jaw muscles shuttling with his indignation.

Luckybug laughed shortly. "Yes, I suppose you're right. A man can't expect to point a six-shooter at his host and threaten to smoke him up if he refuses to do his bidding, and hope to be pardoned for the asking. I regret the theatrical gunplay. But my motto in life is, 'Gain your point,' and, under the circumstances, I couldn't live up to that slogan any other way. I'm pretty stubborn, too, you see.

"About all that I can say, then, is that I am very sorry this unpleasantness occurred. It seems too bad that we humans can't live together on this insignificant little planet and not be forever suffering because of a clash of viewpoints. But so long as we have individual minds, so long as we have different training and different experiences in life to give us these antagonistic viewpoints, so long will there be a lack of harmony among the human race. I'm sorry, Twain—honestly sorry that we had to clash. And it seems now that the only thing Nell and I can do is to take ourselves off as gracefully as possible, and continue our life at Nancy's Dishpan."

To this Reading had nothing to say. He was deeply wounded in spirit, felt that he had been humiliated before the girl he loved. His anger had not subsided one whit, but it had reached the stage of sullenness. In his frank blue eyes, though, there was a look of tragedy which mirrored that in the girl's.

"When the horses have quieted down and are grazing, Nell," Luckybug said to her, "go catch them up, please, and we'll strike out for the home

ranch. By that time I think my friend of the penitentiary will be safely out of Mr. Reading's reach, for the time being, anyway."

It was then that Nell burst suddenly into tears, ran to the bedside, and threw herself on the floor at her father's feet. Luckybug knew, then, as her hot tears fell on his hands, that the important thing had happened between Twain Reading and his daughter. He said nothing, merely smoothing back her dark bobbed hair with tender touches. Sobs jerked her shoulders.

"Daddy," she said at last, looking up at him from under long lashes that gleamed with tears.

"Yes, dear?" he answered softly.

"I love him. We love each other. We were—were coming to tell you when—when he rode away, swinging his rope, after that—that terrible convict. He —we talked about it up on that high hill east of the cabin. We had reached an understanding."

Twain Reading sat with his hands clasped before him, staring at the floor. He did not even glance toward father and daughter as Nell made her difficult confession.

For a little while longer Luckybug caressed her glossy hair. Then he said:

"I'm sorry. I wish that I had known. I might have found some other way of preventing him from meddling in what I considered my own affair. On the other hand, I have learned in time that this man who loves you has a temperament and an outlook on life that I don't favor in a fellow who hopes to marry you. I don't want a son-in-law who makes it a point to go out of his way to punish a fellow suf-

ferer on this earth. He'd punish you if he thought you needed it. And if he did I'd probably kill him, which would ruin the happiness of all three of us."

Reading looked up suddenly. "Don't be ridiculous, Mr. Noble!" he shot out.

Luckybug shook his head gravely. "I'm afraid that you're a hopeless Main Streeter, Twain," he said. "You're too recently from New England, and your ancestors were probably witch-burners."

"But, Daddy, what shall I do?" Nell cried piteously. "I tell you I love him! I can't—can't give him up! I can never be happy without him—now!"

Again the father was silent, as was Reading, who still gloomily surveyed the floor, and the girl's soft sobbing made the only sound in the little cabin.

"We must think this over and talk it over," was Luckybug's ultimate decision. "For the present, anyway, you and I had better hit the trail for home. Come—wipe your eyes, now. Maybe everything isn't lost." He smiled at her hopefully as she raised her head. "Get the horses, please, and we'll get out of here, leaving Twain to study out the matter alone. We'll do the same at Nancy's Dishpan. Time and sober consideration may work wonders toward a reconciliation."

She rose obediently to her feet, fought with the trembling of her lips, and slipped out after the horses.

Fifteen minutes later, having been obliged to bribe them with rolled barley to come to her, she led her father's horse and hers to the cabin door. Reading, silent and morose, arose and went out to help her

with the saddling. He stood back, boyishly stubborn, and permitted Nell to help her father astride.

Luckybug generously reached forth his hand. "Let's think it over soberly and alone, Reading," he offered.

"We'll think it over soberly and alone," agreed the homesteader, but did not take the proffered hand.

Nell set her foot in the stirrup, then looked back over her shoulder at the downcast man.

"Nell!" he cried brokenly. "You mustn't leave me like that!" And he threw wide his arms.

She dropped the reins and the stirrup and ran to him, head down, crying again. He closed his arms about her quivering shoulders and looked defiantly up at her father. He kissed her once, long and hungrily, and pressed her closer.

Then he dropped his arms and turned back into the cabin, not trusting himself to remain while she mounted and slowly rode away at her father's side.

In the cabin, however, he stood at one side of the little window that looked toward the mouth of his trail to Nine Mile, and, keeping his body hidden as much as possible, watched with haggard eyes their progress toward the forest beyond the clearing. And as they disappeared in the trees he lifted his eyes and saw a man on the peak of the hill where Nell and he had spoken their love for each other two hours before. The man held a pair of binoculars, and they seemed to be trained on the two who had melted into the brilliant greenery of the woods.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE HIDDEN CAMP.

The better part of two years had not augmented the facial beauty of Baptist Moxey. The reddish hair was still outstanding and shaggy and of a barber-starving length. The flat, negroid nose, the protruding lips, and the small, intensely blue eyes were the same as ever, except that about these distinctive features the lines of two more life spans had congregated; and increasing age adds to the repulsiveness of the criminal face.

There was with him on the hilltop where Nell Painter and Twain Reading had spoken their love, a short, narrow-shouldered, pigeon-breasted fellow with thin light hair, dished, pinched features, and a dolichocephalic head that was oddly flattened at the back. His face was seamed and tanned, the cheeks grotesquely drawn in, and an enormous flaxen mustache drooped to below the chin. When he spoke he wallowed his words as if he were chewing hot mush and trying to keep it from the tender spots inside his mouth. His tones were deep and guttural, growling, choppy; and few who knew him could interpret what he was saying save Baptist Moxey.

This man was a Russian Finn, and was known to the wandering yegg fraternity merely as Gus the Finn. He was a notorious tramp and yeggman, and had been one of the five who had trailed Nell to

Puerta de Luna when she went to find the father whom she had never seen.

The other three were scattered to the far corners of the United States, for the chase had lost its quarry when they were released from the Mexican prison, and they were of a tribe which the law does not permit to remain a long time in one place. Criminals they were, ready to do anything for money with which to buy booze and the creature comforts of life; but they hadn't the stamina to wait and plan for a coup which was dated years ahead.

Moxey, however, was built of more substantial stuff; and the Finn beside him, while not possessed of Moxey's bedrock determination, was patience itself, because Moxey was his master and Moxey had ordered patience. Gus the Finn was virtually Moxey's slave. His foreign birth and his unintelligible English had made him the butt of Trampdom. He had been a Pariah until Moxey had taken him under his wing and protected him from the fists and the ridicule of the jungle camps. Moxey didn't love The Finn; he had needed him. He offered protection in payment for serfdom; for Gus the Finn collected wood and built the fires when the two were on the road together, did all of the dirty work uncomplainingly, and acted as scapegoat when necessary. And Gus the Finn seemed quite contented with his lot, though his hard, scarred head received many a brutal clout from his master's fists.

"It's them, all right, Gus," said Moxey, as Nell and her father rode into the mouth of the trail to Nine Mile. "So I guess we got th' rancho that Laplace was tellin' us about."

He turned and trained his binoculars in the opposite direction, looking down at the cabin on Luckybug Ranch.

"Th' other bird's gone in th' shack," he continued. "That's th' fella Laplace called Readin'. He used to punch cows at Nancy's Dishpan, Laplace said. I wonder where he comes in."

Gus the Finn drew in his hollow cheeks and made guttural sounds. Moxey understood his meaning, for he nodded briefly.

"Funny they been stayin' at this bird's place so long," the yegg continued. "Laplace musta found out that Luckybug and his kid was thick with this *hombre*, for he said if I didn't find 'em at Th' Dishpan they'd maybe be at this Ike's ranch. I wonder if he *is* in on the deal."

The Finn emitted his bear growl in answer, as Moxey thrust the glasses into a case that hung from his shoulder on a strap.

"Well," he remarked, "we can't do nothin' here. Le's get back to camp an' cook up. I gotta do a little thinkin', an' I can't think when my stummick's twistin' round. C'mon, Finn!"

The processes of circumstance that had injected Kenelm Laplace into Moxey's ingenious plot to "shake down" the notorious Luckybug, of Puerta de Luna, Mexico, for a goodly share of the fortune that he knew about in the California hills, were rather simple.

Moxey had met and spoken with Nell Painter at Sontag, having learned previously that she was about to take train for New Mexico to get in touch with Conrad Gaslyn. It was then that he put the flea in

her ear to the effect that she would do well, in her search for her father, to look up a man called Luckybug, in Puerta de Luna, Mexico.

Then, riding the blind baggage, the rods, the deck, and in boxcars, he and the inseparable Finn had managed to follow her to Las Vegas. There Nell had gone immediately to Gaslyn's ranch, where she had remained for months while Gaslyn, in his travels hither and thither as a cattle-association detective, kept up a sharp lookout for her father. Meantime Baptist Moxey and Gus the Finn were living in a jungle camp close to Las Vegas, having put away funds sufficient to tide them over while they waited for the girl to make the final move toward Mexico.

But Moxey had a healthy fear of the gun-toting Luckybug of whom he had heard so many tales. He had no desire to face such a man, with only the thick-headed Finn to back him up if trouble came. So, not knowing just what lay before him, he had enlisted other hobos who drifted to the jungle camp, and whom he knew, to go down with him if the girl should make a move in that direction. The five of them, he thought complacently, would be a match for even a character with a reputation such as the deadly Luckybug maintained.

But the girl continued to live at Gaslyn's ranch, riding daily over the hog-back hills, trusting to the absent Gaslyn's astuteness to find her father. Meantime the funds of Moxey and The Finn were running low, and if they could not show visible means of support they would be chased from their comfortable quarters by the authorities of the town.

It was then that Moxey and The Finn attempted

to hold up Kenelm Laplace with heavy clubs as weapons, and had found themselves looking into the menacing muzzle of the young man's automatic.

Laplace had just driven cross country in his car from Santa Rosa. Close to the jungle camp where Moxey and The Finn were living their life of comparative serenity, a punctured tire made him stop the car and get out for the inevitable change. Moxey and The Finn had stepped from hiding and threatened him with clubs, their firearms having long since been pawned for the necessities of life. Laplace, in straightening up from his task, had whipped out his automatic—and the clubs fell on the ground instanter.

Righteously indignant, the hide-buyer was on the point of making the two tramps trudge ahead of him to the town lock-up. But in the heated conversation that ensued Laplace, somehow, mentioned that he was on his way to Gaslyn's ranch.

What Laplace had said to convince Moxey that he himself was not so upright in principle as his indignation proclaimed, perhaps Moxey could not even remember. Perhaps Moxey was more astute in reading the criminal face than either Luckybug or his daughter. At any rate, the yegg decided that, to keep himself and The Finn from being taken to jail, which performance might definitely end their glowing plans, the diplomatic thing for him to do would be to give his captor an inkling of what might be gained through his acquaintanceship with Gaslyn.

So he hinted, and Laplace's interest was arrested. They arranged for a later meeting in Laplace's hotel, where Moxey presented himself promptly at the

stipulated hour. He needed money and a man of consequence, he had decided, to put this thing across. Laplace seemed to be the man. They fenced craftily for a time, then the yeggman laid the entire plot before the hide-buyer.

They planned. They decided that it would be better for Laplace not to go to Gaslyn's ranch just then, but to wait for the cattleman's return. Then, if he took the girl to Mexico, Laplace would contrive to fall in with them on the train, while Moxey and his disreputable gang would follow them and plot to waylay Luckybug if he crossed the line into the United States. But they changed this plan, after due consideration, deciding eventually that it was better to wait until Luckybug had started working the mines, and would have more at stake, before appearing on the scene and demanding hush money.

But Luckybug's coup in Puerta de Luna had knocked their plans awry. His subsequent trip to South America and Europe, the start being made while the thugs were still languishing in the Mexican prison, had made the plot look almost hopeless. But Laplace was patient and Moxey was patient. Moxey knew about what part of California to investigate in a search for the Luckybug Lode. So he and The Finn had drifted to the Western coast and waited, supplied scantily with money now and then by their more fortunate accomplice. And the year before Luckybug and Nell at last entered the United States, Laplace had called at Nancy's Dishpan, which ranch was known by the conspirators to be close to the hidden mine, in the hope of getting track of the victims who obstinately refused to walk into the trap.

That visit to The Dishpan had netted them nothing in the way of information, but it had established Laplace as a hide-buyer in the minds of the Hulettes, and had paved the way for a second appearance the following year. Thus logically had circumstances worked in favor of the plotters. And Laplace's second trip to the cow ranch had brought him face to face with the people he wanted to find somewhere in that neighborhood. He was quite certain, moreover, that Luckybug had no suspicion of him whatever. It was so logical that a hide-buyer who made the entire West his field—according to his claim—should visit Nancy's Dishpan in his yearly rounds, that the meeting would be considered a pure coincidence by the man he had planned to rob.

Baptist Moxey and Gus the Finn meandered down the hill on the side opposite Luckybug Ranch. Near the foot of the slope, where a branch of Luckybug Creek slipped swiftly along, was their hidden camp. It was after dark when they reached it, and Moxey kicked the unprotesting Finn into frenzied activity in preparing animal comforts for the coming night.

"I gotta get outa here an' get to Sac to-morrow to see Laplace," he confided, when The Finn's strong coffee had warmed the lining of his stomach and brought peace to his soul. "We're gettin' close—we're gettin' close!"

"Yes, sir, bossman—that's right, bossman," dutifully answered Gus the Finn, sucking in his flabby, quivering cheeks. Though it sounded as if he had said: "Here's where you get your red-hot popcorn." But Moxey understood those choppy words that seemed to growl up from the very bowels of his strange associate.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"I'VE COME TO STAY."

The Hulettes were solicitous over the crippled Mr. Noble when his daughter and he rode in to Nancy's Dishpan after dark. Nothing would suffice but that they must come into the ranch house while She cooked them a hasty dinner. The two accepted the invitation, for Luckybug, though utterly worn out from the long ride, was anxious to bring up the subject of Laplace's recent visit if opportunity should offer.

Old Man Hulette sat at table with them for company while they ate. It was not long before Luckybug was able to bring the hide-buyer more or less casually into the conversation. He watched Hulette's face narrowly, but the rancher's expression showed no change when Laplace's name was mentioned. There was no questioning glance of the eyes which might advertise that the hide-buyer had told them he had known the Nobles as the Painters in days gone by. So Luckybug decided emphatically that Laplace was after him, and that he had not mentioned the name of Painter in the Hulette's hearing. Laplace would not return again to Nancy's Dishpan. The plot had thickened till stirring was no longer necessary. The chase was on—the hounds in full cry now—Nell Painter and Luckybug were the prey.

As soon as they decently could do so they left

the ranch house and sought the snug harbor to which their own little cabin welcomed them. And here, secure from prying eyes and prurient ears and gossiping tongues, they took up their difficulties with hearts that were brave, despite the fact that the hour was late.

Luckybug lay in bed and Nell sat on a stool close by, her head resting on the pillow beside his head. And into the morning hours they talked and planned, as they sought the best way out of the maze of interlocking contingencies that confronted them so portentously.

"I'm sorry, Nell," said the father softly, and it seemed to him that he had been saying things like that all day.

"What are we to do, Daddy?" she asked plaintively. "I love him and he loves me. That's irrevocable. Whatever you do, you must always keep that in mind."

"I suppose I was too impulsive to-day," mused Luckybug. "I should have made allowances for the boy's lack of experience in life. But I had to gain my point. I was determined that that man should not be sent back to prison by him. But Twain will be more lenient, more broad-minded when he grows a little older. I shouldn't have condemned him the way I did."

"Of course not, Daddy. And I think it will come out all right in time. You two will make up and understand each other better."

"That part of the matter doesn't trouble me so much as another side," he told her. "I had learned to like Reading immensely during our short stay

on his claim. I think that this very evening I would have taken him into my confidence, told him about the gold, and confessed that I am an escaped convict. Then he could have filed on the mining claims in his own name, and we could keep in the background.

"Now, however, to make such a confession to him is utterly out of the question. As an escaped convict, he would not consider me fit to be his friend, even if, for your sake, he didn't feel in duty bound to send me back to the penitentiary. No, for your sake and my own, I can never trust Twain Reading with my secret."

"Why for my sake, Daddy?"

"Because I want you to marry him, if you think that you love him and that you cannot be happy without him."

"I do feel just like that. I know Twain does, too."

"All right—we'll let that stand. I take back many things that I said in haste to-day. Even with his narrowmindedness, I think that he wouldn't make a bad son-in-law—that he would be good and true to you. So, on that point, I back out gracefully."

She raised herself and placed one round, firm arm underneath his neck and drew his head close to her cheek.

"But you must never tell him that I escaped from a prison camp," he stipulated. "You must keep my secret, even though I don't just approve of a wife having secrets from her husband. He would never marry you, I'm afraid, if he knew the truth."

Nell sighed but said nothing. She was too happy in the knowledge that her father was not to stand

between her and the man she loved to consider this difficult phase of the situation.

"But what about the claims?" she asked.

"I have decided to get witnesses and post the location notices to-morrow morning," he answered. "You can drive the car as well as I could if I had two arms. We'll go to Sacramento immediately afterward and put the filings on record."

"Under what name, Daddy?"

"Under the name of Painter," he said. "Nelita Painter."

"But, Daddy! That won't do at all. That would be ruinous."

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "I've had the feeling lately—and it's been strong within me—that I am a victim of Fate. I feel somehow that my future has been taken out of my hands entirely. My career seems to be guided by an unseen force, and anything that I may do will have no bearing on the matter whatever. So I just intend to go ahead blindly, acting on impulse, and allowing results to shape themselves.

"Laplace has tracked us down. He is waiting somewhere close at hand for the claims to be filed on and work to start. There is no further excuse for me to continue on here under the name of Noble. Laplace knows that my name is not Noble, and sooner or later everybody else about will know it, too. So I am going to put on a bold face and weather the gale."

"But isn't all this unnecessary?" asked the girl. "We don't need any more money than we have, do we? You have what most people would consider a

fortune in the bank in San Francisco. I myself have a little, as you know. Let me marry Twain Reading, and you leave the country for a short time, to throw Laplace off the scent. Then when I know Twain better—though it seems that I have known him all my life—maybe I will discover that it's safe to tell him about you. And we'll let the gold lie where it is until then. That will be time enough to tell him, and he and I can make the filings, and—and—— Oh, everything will surely come out right, Daddy! If the mines are what you think they are, you'll—you'll have no cause for complaint, I'm positive."

"Planning to shake the old man already, eh?"

"Oh, Daddy, you know I'm not! That's the worst part about my plan. But—but wouldn't that be best? Just for a little, anyway?"

"Perhaps," he responded dreamily. "But I'm not worrying about what I may get from the mines, Nell. I'd trust that boy to play square with me in any deal like that. My great and only difficulty is that I'm mad clear through. Mad and stubborn.

"I ventured back here into the United States to get that gold, so that I could give you everything in life that a rich man's daughter is entitled to. Maybe I'm foolish, but I have set my heart on that. And when a man of my age sets his heart on a thing he likes to, and usually does, attain it.

"That gold is mine. I want it because it's mine. I have determined to get it. I am more determined now than I ever was before. There's a plot afoot to do me up. I have been challenged. I refuse to sneak away, leaving that gold hidden here in the earth—my gold!—and admit defeat before I have

even clashed with my enemies. I won't be chased away—scared away. I'll fight 'em to the bitter end.

"And if in the end they win and Fate decrees that I shall go back to the pen, I'll do so as cheerfully as any game man loses a big pot to another. That's one reason why I have decided to make no bones about this thing, to file on the claims under my right name, and trust to Fate to deal me cards from the top of the deck. I have the reputation of being a fighter. Laplace and his gang of lowbrows have challenged that reputation. I've got to make good, flaunt my very name in their faces almost under the walls of the prison from which I escaped, and fight it out to the bitter finish with them."

"But, Daddy, what will you tell the Hulettes about our name being Painter instead of Noble?"

"I'll tell them the truth—up to a certain point, where I shall simply eliminate. I'll tell them that I knew about this gold years ago, and came back to this country to try to relocate it. I will say that, in order to help me in keeping my secret, I assumed another name for the reason that other people were trying to beat me out of my property. I'll tell 'em everything except that I am an escaped convict from Folsom Penitentiary."

"And Twain?"

"He can be told the same thing, my dear. And then the situation will have resolved itself simply into a contest of wits or clubs or guns between Laplace and me—and let the best man win!"

"And how about the matter of our claims being on Twain's homestead, Daddy?" she questioned.

"That phase will come up soon enough," he said.

"And, like the rest of it, that too is in the hands of Fate. I'm going ahead determinedly, Nell, and let the future take care of itself. I may get woefully whipped in the long run, but remember that for years they've called me Luckybug.

"I'm a gambler at heart, my daughter, and I play my hunches. I feel one now. They started this thing with a man called Luckybug, a man whom they knew to be a bad one, but a clean fighter. Now let 'em finish it! I've come here to stay until they link me up to a prison guard and take me back behind the bars again."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE ULTIMATUM.

At one o'clock the following afternoon the last of the claim notices were posted, having been witnessed by Old Man Hulette and one of his *vaqueros*. Then the little party moved back up Reading's trail to Nine Mile Post Office, where Luckybug's car was waiting to take Nell and him to Sacramento.

On the way to Luckybug Ranch Old Man Hulette and his employee had been told the particulars that Luckybug had outlined to his daughter the night before. They had showed no great surprise, and no indication whatever that the man they had known as Noble had fallen in their esteem by having taken this precautionary measure to keep his secret. Claiming a gold mine was serious business, a secret business, and often a precarious business. A man should not be condemned, then, for pulling down his hatbrim and playing his cards close to his belly, as the West has it.

They had made no comment concerning the situation of the claims. So, as Twain Reading's boundaries were not marked, Luckybug had decided that Hulette and his man did not suspect that the new filings encroached on the squatter's land.

They took Nell's and Luckybug's horses at Nine Mile to lead them back to Nancy's Dishpan. Nell

and her father got into their car and started for Sacramento to record their filings.

On the trail, and while staking out the claims, they had seen nothing of Twain Reading. And, though both Luckybug and his daughter had kept a sharp lookout in all directions, they felt that they had not been spied upon by anybody in league with Kenelm Laplace.

"If they were mining men," Luckybug remarked, as Nell adroitly steered the car to follow the hairpin curves around Jackstone Mountain, "they'd have been on watch and tried to beat us to the recorder's office to jump our claims. But they're not mining men—they're merely plotters and thieves. They wouldn't know how to go about profiting from the claims if they got hold of 'em. No, they want us to do the work and start the ore to flowing out, then they'll step in and dangle their sword of Damocles over my head."

"And if they do, Daddy?" Nell asked.

"Then somebody's likely to get hurt," he answered shortly.

They reached the city in time to record their filings before the closing hour. They had a good dinner in the hotel, where Luckybug boldly registered "Jeremy Painter and Miss Nelita Painter," and afterward went to the theatre.

Next morning they partook of breakfast early, and had gone up to their suite to make ready for the return trip to Nancy's Dishpan, when the telephone bell rang sharply.

Luckybug had just called the office to ask the amount of his bill, preferring to write a check in

the suite rather than be bothered about it at the cashier's window, and had not yet received an answer. He was strapping a suitcase.

"Get that, will you, please, Nell?" he asked.

She stepped to the telephone and removed the receiver. "Yes," she said. "This is Suite 769."

"Ah!" came a man's voice. "That you, Miss Painter? You don't know who this is, I'll bet."

"Why, the cashier, I suppose. We were expecting ——"

"Not this time, Miss Nell. This is Ken Laplace speaking. Saw your and your father's name on the hotel register just a moment ago. I'm stopping here. Like to run up and say hello to you. Will you open your door to me?"

"I—I'll see," Nell faltered. "I'll speak to my father. Please hold the phone."

"It's Mr. Laplace," she announced, her face gone white as chalk.

"Good!" was Luckybug's surprising exclamation. "Ask him to come up. Maybe the first gun is about to be fired, Nell. If so, we want to listen and see if we can find out the caliber of the thing. We'll see Mr. Laplace, by all means."

"Oh, Daddy! I'm—I'm afraid——"

"Tut-tut!" he recklessly tried to banish her fears. "Fate's running the game. Let's see what Laplace has to say."

Laplace came in smiling with all the geniality in the world. He gripped the hands of both with boyish ardor. He was well dressed and modern looking

"Sit down, Mr. Laplace," Luckybug invited in

seeming cordiality. "You're making Sacramento headquarters for the present?"

"Yes, sir—big territory to cover around here. Lots of small ranches tucked away in these hills. Pick up a dozen hides—twenty—fifty almost every day. It pays me to nose out the obscure places where cattle are butchered."

"I doubt it," said Luckybug crisply.

"Oh, but it does, Mr. Painter! By the way—if you'll pardon my inquisitiveness—have you dropped the name of 'Luckybug' since coming to the United States? I didn't hear anybody at Nancy's Dishpan call you that."

"Well, the nickname is not in general use up here," was the ready reply. "But yesterday my daughter filed on a block of mining claims under the name of The Luckybug Mines Company. But perhaps you have been to the recorder's office and seen the entries."

A slow flush dyed the younger man's face. But it passed like the shadow of clouds creeping across the desert.

"You've filed on mining claims? That's interesting. Up in the Dishpan Country?"

"Yes. On Luckybug Creek."

A harried look crept into Laplace's eyes. That last was an unexpected shot.

"Luckybug Creek? That's strange. I suppose you named it."

"No, it was named by pioneers, I imagine, years ago."

"But what a coincidence, Mr. Painter!"

"Hardly that. You see, I discovered the gold above that creek about thirteen years ago. The creek

below the ledge was full of the brisk little water insects known as luckybugs. So the man who was associated with me in the gold discovery and I decided to name the ledge The Luckybug Lode. Shortly after this I went to Mexico and, for sentimental reasons, I suppose—I was young and full of romance then—I took the sobriquet of Luckybug. So you see there's no coincidence about it whatever."

"Well, for the love of Mike!" gasped Mr. Laplace.

"Is it so astonishing as all that?" asked Luckybug, the lips under his close-cropped mustache twitching.

"Well—we—I don't know that it is, after all." Laplace's grin was a foolish one. "It just struck me as odd at first. But of course your explanation makes it altogether logical."

"If you'd gone to the recorder's office yesterday you would have seen that the location of our filings is designated as on Luckybug Creek," Nell's father kept after him relentlessly.

"But why should I go to the recorder's office, Mr. Painter?"

"Call me Luckybug, please, as always," Luckybug corrected. "Why should you go to the recorder's office? Why, perhaps to find out if any new mining claims have been recorded."

"But I'm not interested in——" Laplace changed tack precipitately. "And so you and Miss Painter aren't in this country by accident at all, then. You're a sly one, Luckybug. I might have known you had something up your sleeve. If you and Miss Painter had wanted a vacation you could have found many more delightful spots than Nancy's Dishpan.

Gold, eh? That intrigues me, by Golly! Why, you're a more interesting character, even, than I thought you were."

"Yes, Nell and I have kept our secret pretty close —up to a certain point. We even went under an assumed name at The Dishpan. Perhaps you heard us referred to as the Nobles. Didn't you, now? And when you met the Nobles and discovered that they were the Painters you had met in Mexico, you were too polite to mention the matter either to the Hulettes or to us."

"Well——" Laplace was cornered again. He was waxing fidgety. He found himself unable to think up answers fast enough, for Luckybug was shooting his bolts right and left; and the surprising frankness of his intended victim pitched his mind askew. "I—I don't believe I remember that the name of Noble was mentioned. I think Mrs. Hulette merely told me some guests were stopping in one of their cabins. If—if the name Noble was mentioned before I met you, I—it slipped my mind entirely, when I realized you were Mr. and Miss Painter. You see——"

"Yes, I see quite clearly, Mr. Laplace," Luckybug cut in. "I have seen since the day I found you with my daughter in my home at Puerta de Luna. I put Mr. Gaslyn on your trail when you left with him for the United States. He was to let me know your actions after leaving Mexico. But I sold out my place immediately afterward, and Nell and I made haste to leave the country. We left no forwarding order for our mail. So we didn't get Gaslyn's letter, if he wrote one.

"But I think I know about the information that it contained. It probably told me that, after crossing the line into the States, you tried to shake Gaslyn. He allowed you to think that you had, perhaps. Then he kept shadowing you, and learned that you immediately returned to Mexico, to be on hand when Baptist Moxey and his bunch of crooks were released from the prison into which I had had them thrown.

"And you found out, then, that my daughter and I had vanished. For nearly two years you didn't know what had become of us. So you rambled out here to California and made your visit to the Nancy's Dishpan Country logical by buying hides from Old Man Hulette. You knew The Luckybug Lode was close. You waited until we came. Now, Mr. Laplace, since I know pretty well what your moves have been, let's get down to cases. What do you and Moxey expect to get out of me?"

Laplace's face was burning. His eyes were darting swift glances about the room. He reminded Nell of a dog that has done wrong, expects a whipping for it, and searches vainly for an avenue of escape as soon as the lash is lifted.

"Come! Let's talk business, Laplace. Let's get down to bedrock and drop all subterfuge."

"But, Luckybug," Laplace pleaded insincerely, "I really don't understand a word of what you're talking about. It's—this is mighty peculiar."

Luckybug leaned toward him. "Drop the bunk!" he ordered in a steely tone. "It won't get you anywhere now. You know it. I know what you want,

well enough. But I'd like to see you lay your hand flat on the table."

There was no response. The man was cornered, and for once his wits deserted him. He had not been prepared for this—had not had the least notion that Luckybug suspected him. And the coolness with which the old gambler played his cards—the damning confession that he had all but made—had thrown Laplace's mind into a chaotic state.

"Laplace," he heard Luckybug's smooth tones proceeding, "you can't get away with it. Down there in Mexico several years ago I was considered a hard man. Didn't Moxey tell you that before you went into this big undertaking? Circumstances, Fate, environment made me a hard man. I've never been cleaned, Laplace. I've won every fight I ever went into. One foolish move in my youth—and fundamentally I was in the right at that—made me the fighting fool I was in Mexico. Do you think, Laplace, that I have ceased being a fighter?

"You haven't that much chance of winning!"—and Luckybug snapped his fingers in the young man's face. "Why were you so foolish as to think for a single instant that you could put anything over on Luckybug? Don't you realize that you took your life in your hands when you started this thing? Didn't they tell you? Weren't you warned?

"The gold that is in the hills up there, Laplace, I want for my daughter. I have plenty for myself. All my life I have had no one to love, no one to consider, no one to cherish but my own selfish self. Two years ago I realized a magnificent dream. My daughter, whom I'd longed for years to see, whom

for years I'd fancifully planned for, came into my life. My one desire, my single aim in this world now, is to give her everything that I can. It has become almost a mania with me. The gold in the hills above Luckybug Creek is hers. It has been hers from the day it was discovered. I have come here, at the risk of my freedom, to get it out for her. And, Laplace, I will not be denied this one big thing on which I have set my heart. When you try to thwart me in this, you are striking at my very life. And just as sure as your head is a foot above the ground, I'll kill you if you interfere! The idea of a kid like you, whose nose has hardly stopped dripping, plotting to outwit Luckybug, of Puerta de Luna! Haven't you any sense at all? Would you swallow bichloride of mercury tablets to find out if they're as deadly as they're cracked up to be?

"Now don't misunderstand me, Laplace. I'm not a murderer. But, in a way, you have me with my back to the wall. I can't call upon the law to protect me. There's where you were so short-sighted. You have forced a man with a reputation as a gunfighter into a corner. If you proceed, you'll be deliberately compelling me to kill you. And, under the circumstances, I'd consider that I'd be as justified in killing you as a farmer is when he sets his heel on a slug or a cutworm that's ruining his garden. In other words, you're nothing but a pest—and the law of life demands that pests be done away with."

A sneer made Laplace's lips unsightly. He had accepted the inevitable, since Luckybug refused to fence. The gambler's reference to his immature years had nettled him. He plunged in hotly.

"You won't talk that way when you're looking from the inside out," he choked.

"You'll never send me to prison, Laplace," Luckybug assured him. "Even if you were able to, don't you see that you would gain nothing? The gold claims are recorded under the name of N. Painter. N. Painter is Nell, here. You have no grounds on which to threaten her and scare her into splitting with you for your silence. I have enough money for the development of the claims. If I should go to prison, these funds will be hers. She'll continue right on with the mining venture, and you would have only the doubtful satisfaction of having returned to the penitentiary a man who was more sinned against than sinning. Don't you see how utterly hopeless the thing is for you?"

Laplace rose swiftly to his feet and took a step in the direction of the door. Luckybug made no move to stop him.

"You forget," he shot back, swinging around, "that, while I admit that I have nothing on your daughter, I still have the goods on you, old-timer. You don't want to go back to the pen—you're simply bluffing. You've called my hand. I'm stubborn, too. And now, as you ask, I'll lay all of my cards before me. You'll split with us, or back to the pen you'll go! And if you want to go there, just to be bull-headed and spite me, hop to it! *I'm* mad now!"

"I'm sorry to hear that," smiled Luckybug—"sorry for you. You have less of a chance than ever if you lose your temper."

"All right. Moralize if you want to. I'm going. I'll be here at this hotel, where I'm stopping in-

definitely, when you're ready to come across. But I can't wait long. I'll want an advance almost immediately."

Luckybug's soft chuckling was disarmingly good-humored. "So that's your ultimatum, is it? All right, my son. Now listen to mine:

"Make just one more move in the game that you've started to play with Luckybug, and the public administrator will be browsing through your effects to find out who to wire in regard to the disposal of the corpse. Close the door softly when you go out, please. Nelita, please call the cashier's office again about our bill."

CHAPTER XXX.

"BY N. PAINTER."

Twain Reading had spent a bad night in his little cabin on Luckybug Creek. The fight within his soul was a hotly contested one, for his pride was grievously wounded. But along toward morning, as he tossed about, sleepless, pride succumbed to love. He decided to saddle up that day, ride to Nancy's Dishpan, and make his peace with the father of Nell.

He had done his best to live up to his stern convictions, and had lost by reason of unexpected opposition. His conscience was clear; he had not given in one inch. But the mere fact that he and Noble looked at certain matters from different angles of life had nothing whatever to do with his love for Nell. He would tell Noble just that. Surely Noble had not been serious when he said that he feared for his daughter's happiness if she married him. Those words had been spoken in the heat of passionate anger.

He didn't wish to apologize—he would not apologize. He had nothing to apologize for. He would simply tell Noble that he was sorry for the part he had played in the quarrel, even as Noble had been generous enough to confess regret over his own bull-headedness. The prisoner had escaped. In a way, both men had gained their point. He would call this

to Noble's attention, offer him his hand in reconciliation, and propose that they continue as friends for the sake of Nell.

But he could not recover from his amazement over Noble's swift, decisive action. Though he knew nothing whatever about this man, or even his daughter, for that matter, he had thought of him from the first as a man of means—a city man, perhaps a retired business man—a courteous gentleman cast in the same standardized mold as hundreds of thousands of fairly successful, more or less prosaic, Americans. To have witnessed this man looking coldly at him over the sights of his own six-shooter, and stating casually that he could shoot three buttons off the front of his shirt before he could jump back, created a puzzled wonder in his mind.

Who was this man, anyway? Where did he come from? What was his function in life? What strange, secret past lay behind him? He rode a horse like a veteran cowman, loosely hung in the saddle, with feet thrust far into the stirrups, range style.

And Twain recalled now that he had heard the click of the hammer as this man jerked the gun from its holster. The six-shooter was of double-action pattern. Only an experienced gunman would have cocked the weapon, for some of the best shots with six-guns completely ignore the double-action feature of their Colts. They cock the hammer as the gun comes out of its holster, and some continue to cock it if rapid firing is required. Many, even, cling to the old single-action pattern, maintaining that their thumbs are as swift as the mechanism

which automatically cocks and sends the hammer driving into the cartridge cap in one continuous process. And their aim is usually far more deadly than the double-action marksmen; for the hammer, descending from a stationary position, does not tend to disturb the rigidity of the weapon as when the trigger is pulled to draw the hammer back until it trips and leaps forward for the cap.

Twain was beginning to fear that Noble must have a doubtful if not altogether reprehensible past.

And what about Nell?

But he did not dwell for any length of time on doubts concerning Nell. Instinctively—for love is totally instinctive—he trusted her and knew that she was good and true, no matter what her father might have been or was. No, Nell Noble was above censure. In good time she would tell him everything that he ought to know about her father—if there existed anything that he ought to know. Anyway, his Puritanism was not so deepseated as to cause him to look with favor on the practice of visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children. At least he imagined that it was not.

He arose from bed with the first streaks of dawn in the eastern sky. He had had breakfast and was continuing his fencing job—alone now—before the sun was up. He left his work at noon for lunch, and, after eating, listlessly dragged his feet back to a task from which all the enjoyment had departed.

He threw down his shovel before he had finished another post hole. "I'm going to see Nell," he decided suddenly, "and have it over with."

As John Silver daintily and carefully picked his

course about the obstructions in the trail Twain lolled in the saddle and continued to think of the remarkable man of whom he had been thinking all morning and the greater part of the night just past.

Was he a common braggart? It seemed to Twain at the time of the quarrel that he was disgustingly egotistical. But now that he had cooled off he began to doubt this. Noble had not spoken in the tones that a bully uses.

There had been a deadly earnestness in his voice, and it struck Twain now that he had merely been stating what he believed to be facts when he spoke of his marksmanship and of what an invincible person he was. There had been a sort of fatalism back of his words that was convincing. It was as if Noble had been talking about some other than himself when he warned Twain not to trifle with him. As if the two had been discussing in a confidential way the advisability of Twain's opposing some one reputed to be a hard man to deal with.

The squatter's brown study was interrupted by the sound of voices up the hillside on his left.

The mid-day stillness hung over the forest land. The tops of the pines and spruces were motionless. The sun beat steadily upon their bright-green needles, and the sweat that oozed from them filled the air with a pleasantly pungent odor. Luckybug Creek babbled softly far below him. From far off came the vowelish notes of turtledoves. But these soothing nature sounds seemed not to disturb the tranquillity in which the beautiful foothill country was steeped. Rather, they seemed almost a part of the breathless silence. So that the sound of human

voices that he heard came as a jarring element, came hollowly, boisterously through the stillness.

Silver pricked up his pointed little ears and fluttered a soft snort through his velvet-lined nostrils. Twain reined him in gently and sat motionless in the saddle, listening.

Such dissonant sounds as he had heard will carry far in the wilderness. At times, on a still day like this one, one can distinguish words spoken in an ordinary tone half a mile away.

But in this instance, while the voice that was speaking was indisputably voluminous, the words seemed to make a meaningless jumble.

Then came a second voice:

"Anotherun right here, Gus."

And the man addressed returned in deep-throated tones something that sounded, more than anything else, like:

"Here's where you get your red-hot popcorn."

Twain Reading swung lightly from the saddle and lowered the reins from John Silver's neck. "Stick here a minute, son," he said to the horse, "till I find out what's going on up there on our estate."

Then he clambered up the steep bank which had been cut in the side of the hill in building the trail, parted chaparral bushes, and began breasting his way through.

It required fifteen minutes for Twain to get close enough to hear the men moving about through the brush. And when he had come that close it seemed that they were moving away from him down the other slope of the hill. He heard a few words now

and then, indistinguishable because of the crackling of the branches. He discovered footprints in the loose leafmold under the buckthorn and manzanita, and followed them.

He brought up suddenly and stared in unbelief. Before him stood a pile of rocks, perhaps two feet high, from the top of which protruded a spruce limb three inches in diameter, axed at the upper end, with its bright wood showing.

He took three steps and knelt before it. Through the interstices in the pile of stones he saw the gleam of a new tin can. He jerked away stones and drew it out. It was a baking-powder can. There was a cover on it which fitted tightly. He wrenched it off and drew forth exactly what he had expected to find—a location notice to the effect that a quartz claim had been filed on there, and that the pile of stones marked the northwest corner of the claim, which extended for fifteen hundred feet in a northeasterly direction, et cetera, et cetera.

" 'To be known as "The Luckybug Lode," ' " he read aloud. And on the dotted lines at the bottom:

" 'The Luckybug Gold Mines Company, by N. Painter.' "

To the left of this, under the heading WITNESSES:

" 'Edwin Hulette. William (Waterleg) Mahoney.' "

"Old Man Hulette and Waterleg Mahoney!" he gasped in blank astonishment. "And on my claim—*my ranch!* And who in the devil is 'The Luckybug Gold Mines Company'? And who in hell is 'N. Painter'?"

There he squatted on his heels and glared at the offending rectangle of paper for at least two minutes —glared from it to the can, from the can to the heap of stones, from stones to upreared stick. Meanwhile the sounds of the retreating footsteps had died away, and also the sounds of bodies pushing a course through crackling chapparal.

But wilderness dwellers, individualists though they may be, are not altogether free from the commanding finger of the law. And, above everything else in life, Twain Reading was law abiding. "A dirty, low-down, skunky trick!" he gritted through his teeth. Nevertheless, over the bronze-green tops of the fragrant chaparral the inexorable finger of the law was pointing straight at his clean-cut nose; and, with a heavy sigh, he replaced the paper in the can, twisted the can's lid home, gently set the can within its stony fortress again, and rebuilt the pile of stones where he had torn it down.

Then, with nostrils wide and quivering, he leaped to his feet and continued hastily on in the direction from which the last sounds of the departing men had come.

There was law, yes—and it must be obeyed. Prospectors had a perfect right to file mineral claims on his homestead. But these men were fools. There was no gold here. He had not come upon a single fresh prospect hole, to prove that anybody had tested the ground and found a legitimate excuse to file mining claims on that hillside. They couldn't have prospected there for any great length of time without his discovering their presence. This was spitework of some sort. But who had reason to spite

him? Not Old Man Hulette—not Waterleg Mahoney, big awkward, grinning, good-natured, splatter-brained! And who was "N. Painter"?

He was hurrying forward. He reached the brow of the hill. Before him the land sloped down to the waters of a branch of Luckybug Creek. On the crest of another, higher hill not far away he and Nell had sat their saddles and gazed down at the green ribbon of the boisterous American. And only the day before! It seemed as if a hundred bitter days had passed since then.

Below him he caught sight of a movement in the buckthorn. It ceased at the edge of the timber that lined the little branch.

Twain swung about and ran in the opposite direction. He could get around the hill on Silver, forge up the creek, and gain time.

He clattered down into the trail at last, leaped into the saddle. At a reckless gallop, for the trail was narrow and washed in places from the rains of winter, he sent the gray along toward the joining place of the two streams.

An hour later, stealing carefully forward on foot, he parted a mass of wild cucumber vines that clambered up a tree at the creekside and peered out upon the lazy camp of Baptist Moxey and Gus the Finn.

CHAPTER XXXI.

EYES IN THE CHAPARRAL.

Two men occupied the camp. On the hard ground they lazed, one on each side of a fire. The fire, newly kindled, was blazing sturdily. They apparently were waiting for it to burn down to a bed of coals on which to do their cooking.

One of the men was large and muscular, with a negroid nose, thick lips, and reddish hair. The other was short of stature, slight of build, pigeon-breasted, and with sunken cheeks and a strange-looking head that was flat at the back. His hair was light and wispy, his face grotesque and seamed.

They did not speak. The large man lay on his back with fingers interfretted behind his head, gazing with blue eyes at the placid blue of the sky above him. The other gloomily watched the fire, poked it now and then with a charred stick.

The camp looked as if it were a more or less permanent one, but there were no signs of four-footed burden bearers anywhere about. The heavy Hungarian nails in the soles of the campers' high-laced boots, however, proclaimed that their mountaineering was accomplished on shank's mare.

For more than five minutes Twain watched them, while one continued to gaze lazily up at the floating clouds above and the other occasionally prodded the fire into renewed activity. Then, realizing that he

was gaining nothing by spying on this undemonstrative pair, the homesteader parted the cucumber vines and strode into their camp, determined to have an understanding with them forthwith.

The man with the flattened skull heard him coming and looked at him with startled eyes. Up from his stomach came a series of guttural sounds like the growling of a peevish bear, directed as a warning to the man on the other side of the campfire, but uninterpretable to Twain.

But the big man understood. He half raised his body from the ground, gave Twain an apprehensive stare, flopped over on his stomach and clawed his way over the earth toward the trunk of a nearby tree, at the base of which an automatic pistol lay.

Twain's voice rang sharply: "Don't grab it, brother! You're several seconds late."

His own six-shooter had leaped from its holster the instant the man started for the tree and Twain saw the automatic there. It's muzzle waved slightly from Moxey to The Finn, like the upreared head of a cobra threatening to strike.

Gus the Finn dodged every time the muzzle covered him. One hand he held to his face, frozen there, as if to block a possible stream of bullets directed at that gargoyle mug.

Baptist Moxey had ceased his crawling. On hands and knees he remained motionless, looking sidewise at the invader of the camp as he waited for the next command.

Twain's tones were modulated when he spoke again.

"No use to dive for that gun," he said. "A

rather silly move, for you might have seen that I was heeled. I want a few words with you men. I want to know about the quartz claims filed on up there on the hill at ten twenty-five this morning, according to the date and hour written on the notices. What have you to say about 'em?"

Moxey changed his ridiculous position to a sitting posture on the ground. He bent his legs and clasped his hands about his shins. He leered up at Reading with eyes that blazed sarcastically from the mat of stubby reddish beard that covered his face.

"Well, *what* about 'em?" he demanded.

Twain lowered his gun, but did not return it to the holster.

"Which of you is 'N. Painter?' " he asked.

"Maybe I am and maybe he is," was Moxey's contemptuous return, as he nodded his head at the trembling Finn.

Twain held his temper. "Perhaps you don't know it," he said, "but you've staked out your quartz claims on land that I have claimed as a homestead. It's true that I'm only squatting on it now, but the Department of Agriculture is back of me; and in less than a year from now I have every expectation of being permitted to make a filing as a bona fide entryman.

"Now," he continued, "while it's true that this land of mine is in a mineral reserve, a country that's always been looked upon as a mining and cattle district, I think that I'm entitled to demand that you show good cause for filing quartz claims on it.

"In other words, fake mining claims, located for any reason whatsoever on my land, will not be toler-

ated. What or who is back of all this assinine business I can't imagine; but I do know, or thoroughly believe, that the entire matter is farcical.

"While the creek that runs around the base of that hill shows a little color in the pan, there's no gold hereabouts that's worth a genuine prospector's attention. So I demand to know something about these quartz claims of yours before I'll back out and give you a free hand to go ahead with your assessment work. Talk up, please—I'm entitled to know all about this deal."

He had addressed his words to Moxey; for the other man looked stupid, excepting that he seemed to have brains enough to be afraid, for his ugly face was still pallid and distraught. His weird eyes remained fascinated on the six-gun that hung in Reading's hand; and now and then he licked his lips like a culpable dog who anticipates punishment.

But the man with the flaring reddish hair seemed not afraid. In his small eyes had come a scheming, weighing look that was fraught with cunning. He studied Reading with insolent speculation, and it seemed to the cautious watcher that his brains were struggling with some momentous problem connected only indirectly with himself.

"Come! Can't you talk?"

"If ye'll le'me get to that bag over there by that tree, bossman," drawled Moxey, "I'll show ye somethin' that maybe ye won't like to see."

Twain stepped promptly to the bole of the tree in question, stooped quickly, and picked up the automatic.

"All right," he said, "let's see it. I'll keep this till I'm ready to leave."

He deposited the short-barreled weapon in a pocket of his leather chaps.

"Oh, ye needn't be scared I'm gonta start anythin'," the man reproved him. "They's nothin' we need fight over. Ye just surprised me when ye come buttin' in a minute ago, and I went fer th' gun before I thought."

Lazily dragging himself along the ground like a crippled beggar, he reached the tree and fumbled in a knapsack that stood against the trunk. One by one his big, hairy hands brought out lumps of quartz that flashed yellow in the sunlight sifting down through the tops of the spruces overhead.

"There's six chunks that come from a hole in th' ground up there on that hillside," he said, sitting back and nursing his shins again. "Look 'em over, old-timer." And he began rocking backward and forward to show complete indifference.

Twain stooped and, one by one, took up the glittering lumps, which in size were from that of a walnut to the dimensions of his fist.

Delicate, frosty-looking designs blinked up at him from the crevices in the quartz. They resembled the fernlike traceries that frost leaves on the windowpane, but their gleam was golden instead of silver. Twain Reading gazed at them, his heart beating rapidly, his brain stunned with disbelief.

"Purty, ain't they, kid?'

Twain raised his haggard eyes and fixed them on his inquisitionist. "*You dug these out of my land?*"

Moxey nodded toward the sun-bathed crest of the hill. "Up there. I c'n show ye th' hole."

Twain stood erect again, allowing the lumps of crystal to thump hollowly on the ground. The thumps were representative of the despair and disappointment that were torturing him.

"You're Painter—N. Painter?" he asked dully.

"That's what them notices say," Moxey answered.

"And this man here?"

"Don't think about him. He's jest my flunky—a poor goof that th' brains leaked out of when somethin' flattened the back of his nut that way. I'm th' guy ye gotta deal with, kid."

"How long have you known about this gold deposit, Mr. Painter?"

Moxey shrugged. "Matter o' sev'r'l years, I judge. Been keepin' it dark while I raised th' money to—now—go ahead and work th' claims. Jest made th' riffle lately."

"You're a prospector, then?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't ye? Do piano tuners hunt for gold in such godforsaken jungles as ye got 'round here?"

"And you intend to go ahead with development?"

"That's th' big idear, bossman."

Twain remained silent for several seconds, Moxey eyeing him evilly. "You realize," he said finally, "that you won't be popular in this country, don't you? All the people about here will sympathize with me. It isn't the popular thing to do, in a country like this, to file mining claims on a homestead claim without notifying the homesteader of intention to do

so and making some arrangement with him whereby he will share in the profits."

"Well," considered Moxey, "I hadn't thought anythin' about that. But I guess it don't worry me none. I never been so damned popular, anyway, that people pestered me. I guess I c'n stand th' gaff. And as fer splittin' th' loot with ye, I jest can't see it. Nobody never split nothin' with me. Not once. Finders is keepers—that's what my bible says."

Twain Reading's lips looked hard as he abruptly turned about to go. "I'll find that prospect hole you mention," he said, "and investigate for myself. I can't believe that such a gold deposit as those samples indicate could have escaped prospectors in these hills for years. But we'll see. And don't for a minute consider that this matter is closed, even though I'm satisfied that your claim is legitimate and made in good faith. I was here first. That is, I made my claim first. I'm going to stick. And I hope to be able to regulate what goes on within the boundaries of my claim. I'll see you later, perhaps."

"Don't hurry any to get to th' recorder's office and try to file ahead o' me," Moxey jeered after him. "That's tended to already."

Twain swung about. Here was a point that had escaped him. If the claims had been located at ten twenty-five that morning, as the notices proclaimed, how could this man Painter have recorded his filings and returned to the hills by half-past two in the afternoon?

But as he turned to demand the explanation he saw

a pair of eyes that were witnessing this little woodland scene from the cover of chaparral bushes that grew luxuriantly across the creek.

Then a man with a broad-brimmed black Stetson on his head, a six-gun dragging at his hip, and a short-barreled shotgun in his hands, stepped forth. Two others rose behind him—both heavily armed—and followed him into the open space which was centered by the camp.

Both Moxey and Reading stared their astonishment over this unexpected appearance. Gus the Finn licked his lips, and his flabby cheeks shook ludicrously from this new terror that threatened.

"Well, for the love of Mike, Sheriff Olcott!" gasped Twain, as he recognized the foremost man. "Trying to scare me stiff? What in the devil are you doing here?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE IMPOSTOR.

Twain Reading knew Sheriff John Olcott quite well. He was a dark, heavyset fellow with rank black eyebrows that bristled over piercing eyes. His record as an officer of the law was enviable.

The two men accompanying him were strangers to the squatter.

Olcott came to Reading's side and offered a tremendous hand. But he kept his eyes on Moxey and The Finn.

"Glad to see ye, Reading," came his rumbling voice. "Who're yer friends?" He nodded toward the men beside the campfire.

"They're hardly friends of mine, Sheriff," Twain smiled.

But Olcott was not listening. He strode across to the fire and fixed his eyes on Moxey, who screwed himself about and looked uncomfortable.

"What's yer name, friend?" the sheriff asked.

Moxey hesitated. Then out it came, in self-protection:

"Painter."

"Yours?" The sheriff swung about on Gus the Finn.

The Finn's quivering chops seemed almost to flap like canvas in the wind. The name that he shiver-

ingly gave—if it was a name—caused the sheriff to ask Moxey:

"What's that he said? What's the matter with 'im?"

"You can't make 'im," Moxey explained. "I guess I'm about th' only man that can. They call 'im Gus the Finn. That's th' only name I know 'im by."

"Where you from?"

"Well—now—jest drifted in here, Sheriff. We're prospectin'."

"You look like a jailbird to me," the sheriff told him candidly. "Sure you didn't help an escaped prisoner get away durin' th' last few days?"

"No, sir, bossman—I never seen 'im. Honest!" Moxey's eyes were blue and round with the fervor of his denial.

"Oh, well," remarked the sheriff, "ye needn't be so damned emphatic about it. Ye talk like a bird that knows how to lie, anyway. I don't believe I'm gonta like you, fella. Reading"—he glanced back over his shoulder—"what about these Ikes filin' minin' claims on yer land? Us boys was hidin' there in th' chaparral and heard it all. Been squattin' there, watchin' this camp and waitin' fer these birds to return, for over two hours. Then when they did come, and before they'd said anythin' worth while for us to hear, you come buttin' in and crabbed th' game. What's it all about?"

Twain walked over to the three. The other men sat on a down tree to wait and listen. Briefly Twain told the sheriff about the rock monuments on the hillside and the notices within them.

"That's tough, all right," observed Olcott, glowering unfriendlily at Baptist Moxey and the unobtrusive Finn. "But I reckon these boys here are within their rights. But it's a hell of a note, just th' same. I've seen sections where, if a thing like this took place, they'd be bodies danglin' from a limb to-morrow mornin'.

"Well, boys"—the sheriff addressed his companions—"guess we can't get nothin' here. Le's hunt up th' rest o' th' bunch and find a place to camp and eat. By th' way, Reading, *you* didn't see anything of the bird we're after sneakin' around in these woods, did ye? We heard he had made this way. Couple o' fellas sighted 'im three days back. He's a bad one. We think he bumped a guy off t'other side o' Jackstone Mountain, jest after he made th' break. That's what let's me in on th' hunt. Personally, I wish they'd keep their dam' prisoners to home, or else know how to find 'em when they make a getaway. I got plenty o' county stuff to look out for, without chasin' escaped prisoners fer th' State. How 'bout it, Reading?"

There was only a moment's hesitation before Twain made answer. Swiftly his mind had turned the problem this way and that while the sheriff had been talking. The sheriff had asked him if he had seen anything of the escaped prisoner in the woods. He hadn't. He had seen him in his own cabin and running across the clearing. Twain Reading didn't believe in white lies. But he felt that, for at least once in his strictly regulated life, he must evade in order to protect the father of the girl he loved.

"I've been pretty busy," he said, "and haven't

been in the woods a great deal. No, your man didn't show up in the woods near my place."

"Well, keep yer eye peeled, will ye, Reading? I'd like to get this bird back home and get th' matter off my hands. Drop in on me when ye're in town and le'me know how ye come out with these claim-jumpers here. C'mon fellas—I'm starved. And we're a long ways from th' grub wagon, I reckon. Better'n two hours wasted here. Ye might give this fella back his gat, Reading; I saw ye slip it in yer chaps."

Twain's face flushed. He had actually forgotten Moxey's automatic in his perturbation. He plucked it out with a grin and passed it, butt first, to its owner.

The sheriff and his deputies walked away into the northeast, and soon were hidden by the trees.

Twain turned his back on Moxey and The Finn and hurried back to his horse.

The interruption of his trip to Nancy's Dishpan to make his peace with the father of Nell had occupied considerable time. Twain glanced at the sun as he rode up out of the cañon. No, he would not make that trip to-day. But to-morrow morning he would start out early. For the remainder of the afternoon he wanted to study over this new problem that had presented itself. And when he did ride to The Dishpan, he wished to have a talk with Old Man Hulette and Waterleg Mahoney regarding their witnessing the signature of N. Painter on the location notices.

How had they happened to be on hand? Didn't they even suspect that the alleged claims were on his homestead? And he wanted, too, to find the

remainder of those notices that afternoon, and, if possible, the prospector's hole from which the glittering crystals had been taken. One problem at a time. He would see the Nobles to-morrow morning.

And then it occurred to him that he had not secured an answer from the man called Painter as to how it had been possible for him to file his notices on the land at about half-past ten in the morning, then go to Sacramento and record the filings, and be back on Luckybug Ranch at two o'clock—a physically impossible feat. The interruption by the sheriff, just as he had turned to put the question to the man, had driven the matter from his thoughts, which already were chaotic over the calamitous pass.

Ought he to go back now and find out all the details? No, it was too late. There would be another time. Soon enough, perhaps, all of the appalling details would be tormenting him. The last two days had been bitter ones indeed for the ambitious homesteader. It seemed that relentless fate was pursuing him, determined to crush his prospects at every turn.

* * * * * *

Baptist Moxey became intensely active after Twain Reading had left his camp. He cuffed the meek Finn into swiftly preparing something for him to eat, and stalked about, with corrugated brows and fingers locked behind his back, while the hasty cooking was in progress. He gulped the food when it was ready, choked until his face was purple on the coffee. And with a sandwich in either hand he hurried away through the trees, ordering Gus to "stay put" until he returned.

Moxey's outlined business also had been interrupted that same morning. He had planned for an early start to the highway, where he hoped to catch a passing automobile and buy or beg a ride to Sacramento. Preferably the latter. He had been anxious to get in touch with Ken Laplace and tell him that Luckybug and his daughter had spent a week or more on the little ranch which was bordered by the creek.

But after he had started, and was two miles from camp, he saw Luckybug, his daughter, and two cowpunchers riding down the trail that connected Reading's ranch with Nine Mile. Through the trees he had watched and had seen the little party climb a hill on the north side of the creek. Stealing closer, he became aware that he was at last looking upon the coveted site where the gold was hidden, and that Luckybug was posting location notices on the claims, with the two *vaqueros* as witnesses.

This engrossing development held him in the woods until the girl and the men had ridden off again up the trail. Then Moxey had taken their place on the hillside and, one by one, nosed out the pyramids of stones. Also he found the spot where Luckybug had dug some days before, and delving into the earth, had found the glittering quartz which had so greatly disturbed the squatter.

Childishly wishful to share his discovery with another and thus bring glory upon himself, he had hurried back to camp to get The Finn, there being no one of more importance before whom Moxey could parade his triumph.

And thus it came about that Reading had heard

them talking, and had tracked them to their lair, where they had gone for food before Moxey continued his journey to the highway.

It was now quite late in the afternoon, but Moxey felt that he must get to Laplace as soon as possible with the welcome news that the fortune was finally just outside their grasp.

But Moxey frowned as he hurried on. Things were not going just to suit him. This homesteader threatened to wreck their plans. He had not known that the man at whose cabin he had seen Nell and Luckybug was a squatter—had had no idea that the gold was on land that was claimed by him. Here was a new and unforeseen element of risk.

Moxey, however, had a plan. He had advanced it by leading Twain to believe that he was N. Painter and had made the filings on the claims. And if Laplace would agree with him in this plan, everything would come out all right after all—at least so far as Moxey was concerned.

He reached the trail to Nine Mile and hurried along it, keeping a sharp lookout for Reading, lest he should chance to be on his way to the store and post office. And presently, when he heard sounds of footsteps ahead of him on the trail, he ducked headlong into the underbrush on the uphill side and waited anxiously.

Nearer came the footsteps, and they were coming fast. Moxey held his breath.

Then into a sunlit spot walked Ken Laplace, and the heart of the yeggman slipped down in place again.

"Hey, Ken!" he husked excitedly. "Wait! It's me!"

And he came from hiding and stood on the trail before his generalissimo.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"I'M THROUGH!"

"LUCK at last, by God!" puffed Moxey, as he and Laplace stood face to face in Reading's trail to Nine Mile. "When'd ye come out, bossman?"

"Just got here," was Laplace's obvious answer to an obvious question. "Came out from Sacramento at forty miles an hour. Car's up on the highway. Lucky I stumbled onto you. Don't know whether I'd have been able to find your camp again or not. Why haven't you drifted in to see me? Hasn't there been anything to report at all?"

"Plenty to report, bossman—plenty," quoth Baptist Moxey. "And I wanta tell ye it ain't as easy fer me to drift in to see you as it is fer you to float out and see me. I ain't got no lizzie."

"Let's get off the trail and sit down and have a talk," Laplace suggested. "I'm sweltering."

They clambered down into the bottoms of Luckybug Creek, where the man from Sacramento laved his flushed face in the cool water. Then they sought out a ferny glen on the other side for their consultation.

"Anythin' new with you?" asked Moxey.

"Plenty," Laplace replied. "I saw Luckybug in Sacramento. He has a broken arm. Don't know how he got it—hadn't time to ask before he started panning me. The claims have been recorded in the

name of The Luckybug Mines Company, signed 'N. Painter.' "

Laplace waited in vain for a gleam of pleasurable surprise in Moxey's eyes. But Moxey only rolled a cigarette and remarked:

"I knew that before noon this mornin'. Has Luckybug gone crazy, to name th' claims that way and have th' kid sign her name Painter instead o' Noble?"

"I don't know whether he's crazy or not," Laplace replied. "But he's a fighting fool again. And he told me to my face that he's been onto us since we tangled up with him in Mexico."

And the hide-buyer told in detail about his encounter of the morning with Luckybug. He concluded:

"He's stubborn, reckless, fighting mad—bad medicine. He told me to make one more move to get him and he'd kill me."

"That settles it," said Moxey promptly. "Me—I'm through, bossman. I'm as scared o' that bird as I am o' th' devil 'imself. I got enough."

"Now listen here," Laplace flared up: "What's the difference between facing him now and later on? Any way you figure, it has to be done sometime. We've got to get a dead drop on him. There's no other way, as I've told you all along. Got to find him out alone and gang him. Then he'll be harmless."

"That's what the lion tamer thought when he put the lion in the cage," Baptist Moxey murmured. 'But that same lion's had sev'r'l tamers since. Me—I'm through. Because listen: Wait'll I tell ye

what I found out to-day. It ain't only Luckybug we got to buck. There's some one else. Listen to my tale o' woe, bossman."

Then Laplace gave ear to the history of the posting of the notices, Moxey's discovery of the gold-bearing quartz, of Reading's pitching himself headlong into the machinery of the plot, of the sheriff's unexpected appearance in camp.

"And you let this homesteader believe you were N. Painter?" Laplace burst forth hotly.

"Bossman, I done just that. I couldn't see no other way. I was aimin' to keep him from scoutin' round and discoverin' jest who had done it. He don't know his friends have stung 'im. He thinks their name is Noble, don't he? He didn't know nothin' at all about this gold. He was white as a corpse when I showed 'im th' purty rocks. Luckybug, pretendin' he's his friend, has gypped 'im. Or else Luckybug don't know neither that his gold is on this Hoosier's land.

"I let him think my name was Painter, didn't I? 'Cause why? To keep 'im from findin' out th' truth immediately. He's a fightin' fool, too, this hick is. If he finds out Luckybug has gypped 'im, he'll try to shoot th' guts outa him. And if he does, where are we? Luckybug will be dead, and we ain't got nothin' on his kid. She c'n go ahead with her minin' proposition, just like Luckybug told you she could, and laugh at us.

"And now, on th' other hand, if Luckybug kills this bird in th' quarrel, where'll we be? He'll either be sent to th' pen for murder—which will leave us holdin' th' sack entirely—or he'll hafta beat it outa

th' country. If he does th' last, where are we? He'll either turn th' claims over to th' kid and back her with coin from some distant hidin' place, or he'll drop 'em altogether and take her with 'im.

"Now, listen, bossman. Don't interrupt. You ben doin' all th' talkin' since I let ye in on this deal. Now I'm gonta talk a little. I got a plan that'll let us out. As things stands, we ain't got no chance to win at all. So listen to what I gotta say:

"I let this Jehu think that I'm N. Painter, didn't I? So then he won't rush off to Nancy's Dishpan to find out from Old Man Hulette who N. Painter is. He thinks he knows—see? That keeps him put till we're through with Luckybug. Now listen: Is Luckybug in Sac?"

"I doubt it. I think he's on his way back here. He was packing a suitcase when I talked with him in his hotel rooms. I must have passed him, for I drove like hell."

"Well and good. Then if he's comin', you and me gotta get 'im before th' day has passed. Get 'im, and get 'im right!"

"What do you mean, get him before the day has passed?" Laplace demanded suspiciously.

"I mean jest that, bossman. Th' time has come for th' big clean-up. And if we don't get ours now, we won't get nothin'. Luckybug has got money. You told me you found out down in Mex that he got over sixty grand for his joint. And he'd been pullin' down jack hand over fist for years before he peddled his place."

"Well, what of it?" the hide-buyer demanded.

"We want it," said Baptist Moxey.

"Of course we do," Laplace sneered. "We want that and five times that added to it."

The tramp shook his head. "Listen," he said: "Th' stuff is off for th' big haul. I already explained how this homesteader buttin' in has queered th' deal. We gotta get somethin' of what Luckybug's got now while th' gettin's good.

"Listen here, Laplace: Me and Th' Finn ain't been livin' any too high since we hooked up with you. You ain't comin' acrost as reg'lar as ye might. I——"

"I've supplied you with all the money that I could spare," Laplace cut in. "You know I haven't been making anything at all since I came to California this time. I'm about all in financially. But I've played square with you."

"We ain't livin' in no hotel in Sac—Th' Finn and me," Moxey reminded him. "We're livin' in th' jungles, doin' all th' work, and th' livin' ain't any too good. I got enough of it myself. I stuck her out a long time, but I'm weary now. If Luckybug has got fifty thousan', I want half of it. The other half is yours. That's enough for me."

"But——"

"Wait a minute," came Moxey's inexorable tones. "We'll get th' drop on 'im to-day. You and me'll beat it up to th' highway right now. I got my glasses with me. You know his machine. We'll get on that long, straight stretch o' road and watch. You c'n tell his car comin' a good ways off. When we see it we'll drag a log across th' road, and he'll have to stop when he gets up to it. I know th'

place—I know th' log's waitin' there. I figgered it all out a little while back.

"He stops his car, gets out. Then you and me show up, holdin' guns on 'im. You cover th' kid; I'll 'tend to Luckybug. We'll run their car into th' trees and hide her. Then we'll bring Luckybug and th' girl down this way.

"You keep yer gun on 'em—see?—while I ramble over th' hill and get Th' Finn. We'll break camp, Gus and me, and come back to where you are. Then we'll make Luckybug write his check for fifty thousan' dollars. We'll tie 'em up, give Th' Finn a gat, and tell 'im to watch 'em till you and me go to Sac and cash th' check. We split th' loot. Then we bid each other one big, fond goodby and beat it, every fella fer 'imself. When Th' Finn gets tired waitin' fer us he c'n turn his prisoners loose, or do anythin' he dam' pleases with them and himself. Half o' that fifty thousan' is enough for me, bossman. I'm through. Th' play's gettin' too thick. It's thick as mud already."

Laplace glared at him contemptuously, his lips wrinkled. "Why, you poor fish!" he scoffed. "You weak-spined quitter! Do you think I've waited and worked for two years for a measly twenty-five thousand dollars? Not on your life! This is the only really crooked thing I ever went into. (And it isn't crooked, at that. Just business.) But I don't want any more of it in mine. I want to make one big haul and quit forever. I want at least a hundred thousand, or nothing."

"Ye'll take nothin', then," growled Moxey.

"There's no sense in quitting, Moxey," Laplace pleaded.

"This homesteader's appearance on the scene doesn't mean anything. Only that we'll have to wait a little longer, till things are running. He and Luckybug will reach some understanding, and the development of the mines will go right ahead. Beat it out of the country for a while, you and The Finn. Keep in touch with me. I'll leave, too, and see if I can pick off a piece of money. Then we'll come back, when Luckybug really has something worth our time, and tell him what's what."

Moxey slowly shook his head. "No, I'm through waitin'. I been a good waiter, but it ain't th' best thing I do. I ain't a hog, either. Twenty-five thousan' would make me a king o' th' earth. That's all I wanta be. And if you ain't satisfied with th' same, here's where we split. Talk fast, 'cause if ye don't want any of it in yours, I'm goin' up on th' highway, and——"

"Yes, and what?"

"Well——" Moxey hesitated.

"Well is good! You can't do anything. What bank would cash a big check for you? I'd have trouble myself, even, in getting one cashed. Besides, I'm sure Luckybug banks in San Francisco, instead of Sacramento. I saw a checkbook on a San Francisco bank open on the desk in his suite this morning, and made a note of it."

"All th' more reason, then, why ye gotta stand by me," said Moxey complacently. "I ain't waited and worked two years for *nothin'*. Get that!"

They were watching each other warily. Both

were thinking fast. It seemed to each that they were facing a deadlock which could not be broken.

Moxey was thinking: "Just one way for me to handle this thing. Pull my gun and throw down on him. Take his gun away from him. Unload it. Give it back to him. Make him go with me and use the empty gun to make the gi. come to time. I'm through—posi-*tive*-ly! I gotta——"

His eyes narrowed suddenly and he dragged at the gun that was slung under his left arm. But the atmosphere seemed to be charged with orange fire. A great roaring filled his ears. His gun came out. He staggered to his feet. Another roar. Orange fire blinded him again.

Then Laplace stood over him where he lay prone on the ground, his tongue protruding, the breath rattling in his throat, one leg working slowly up and down, as if it were pedalling a bicycle.

Laplace's face was paper-white. His chest was heaving. With popping eyes he gazed in horror and a sort of childish wonder at the twitching thing at his feet.

There came a final convulsion, and Baptist Moxey lay still.

"My God! My God!" Laplace whined nasally. "I—I didn't know I was doing—*that!*"

And the derelict, Baptist Moxey, had gained his point. *He was through.*

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CRIMSON STAINS.

It was shortly before dusk that same day. Twain Reading had just finished his lonely evening meal and washed the dishes. Now he was seated under the spreading liveoak before the little cabin, listening to the murmur of the waterfall and the incessant croaking of frogs.

Despite his many troubles, he had enjoyed his supper. The piece de resistance had consisted of something for which he had been hankering for days. And this was nothing more or less than hamburger sandwiches.

Dwellers in the wilderness are frequently assailed by outlandish longings. Their menus are of necessity monotonous. Often the stomach and the palate will revolt against this deadly sameness. Then will come freakish yearnings for the unattainable in foodstuffs. The desert prospector, camped under the stars, will look upon the greasy bacon in his pan with high disfavor and long for oysters fried. Or perhaps it will be fresh green peas and nothing else. He feels that he could eat fresh green peas three times a day for years to come. And often the lonesome malcontent will wish for something which, in his urban life, he seldom cared for.

It had been so with Twain to-night. He had longed for hamburger sandwiches, blood-rare; and

it seemed as he sliced off the last fragments of a shank of ham that he would lie or steal or perjure himself to set his strong white teeth in one hamburger sandwich, rare and hot from the stove.

Then at the cabin door a voice had called:

"Hey, cowboy! What ye got for supper?"

It was "The Toy" who had hailed him. The Toy was a diminutive cowpuncher, scarce five feet in height, who had worked for years at Nancy's Dishpan. His true name was Lysippus Aldergrain —which he shamefacedly admitted when pressed— but his slight stature caused him to be known as The Toy throughout the Dishpan Country.

Behind the cantle of his saddle a gunnysack was tied. Inside the gunnysack, when Twain had parted the mouth, was a clean white flour sack. In the flour sack a ten-pound hunk of beef and two fresh loaves of home-made bread.

The Toy grinned at Twain.

"I hadta ride over thisaway to-day to see if th' Old Man could borry Sam Hedge's mowin' machine," he explained. "Both o' our old fiddledeedees done broke down this mornin' when we went at th' bluejoint in th' lower crick pasture. Th' Old Man allowed he'd cut that patch fer hay, and bingo!— both mowers was out o' business in half an hour.

"So he sent me over to Hedge's, and when She knew I was goin' she loaded me up with this here beef and this here elegant bread, an' says fer me to take it to th' meek little homesteader over here. Not knowin', I reckon, that it meant a four-mile ride offen my trail—not carin', either. It's you she loves. Grab it and le'me go. I'd eat with ye, cow-

boy, but Hedge's woman throwed a top feed into me before I left. And my blankets'll be lonesome before I breeze into th' corral to-night.

"And here's sumpin I pretty near forgot—a note from Old Man Hulette 'bout sumpin or other. Take her an' leave me ride. I hope ye choke on th' bread and vomit up th' meat. Solong, cowboy-gone-wrong!"

And with that parting shot, The Toy had galloped off toward the trail for Nine Mile.

The animal from which the meat was carved had been newly killed, but that makes little difference in the cattle country. The piece of beef was a choice cut, but that made no difference at all. Twain had sacrificed a porterhouse cut in the little sausage-grinder that was among his culinary equipment. He owned this convenience by reason of having bought, when he took up his claim, the meager household furnishings of a family that was leaving the country.

The grinding had been frenzied, the frying of the patted discs of hamburger swift. Hulette's note lay on the bed, forgotten. Twain had slapped the fragrant slabs between slices of Her delicious home-made bread, and the orgy was on.

And now as he sat under the protecting liveoak and listened to the soothing sounds of an evening in the woodland, his heart was warmed, and it seemed to him that his difficulties, after all, were nugatory—that the sun of morning would see them settled—that once more happiness would come to Luckybug Ranch, and all misunderstandings and dissensions would vanish for evermore. Bless the

woman, anyway! She was worth her weight in gold —a reckless statement, considering her bulk.

Then suddenly he was reminded of Hulette's note.

He rose and went into the cabin. He lighted the coal oil lamp and sat on the bed to read. His eyes grew wide and he stared at the dirty sheet of paper in his hand, as these words blazed up at him:

. . . I thought maybe the monuments they piled up was pretty close to being on your land. I did not say anything about it to him and the girl, but I thought it was only right that you be told about it. These people are city folks and you might say outsiders. And I think us fellows up here in the hills had ought to stick together in a case like this. I suppose you will be surprised to read that their name is Painter and not Noble. I thought that was kind of funny, but did not say anything about it. And it was the girl who signed the notices you will find under the name of N. Painter. I hope everything comes out all right and that these claims are not on your land. They are probably not worth much, anyway.

Yours,
Edwin Hulette.

Twain scarcely had time to realize the full significance of this when there came the sound of thudding hoofs moving toward the cabin through the gathering night. He looked up, a frown of puzzlement on his brow.

Who now? It had been a day of some activity already. Not since he had started living on Lucky-bug Ranch had he seen so many people in the vicinity within so short a space of time.

The hoofbeats stopped before the cabin door. He heard low voices. He rose, as he shoved the note into a pocket, to face Sheriff John Olcott in the

doorway. Behind him three men peered in over his shoulder.

"Well, Reading," came the sheriff's voice, "here we are again."

"So I see, Sheriff," Reading dully laughed. "And you didn't find your chuck-wagon. And your keen sense of smell told you that I have fresh beef to-day. And you're here to eat. All of which is fair enough. You'll find some feed for your horses in the stable. You know where the creek is. I'll start the cooking right away. How many of you came?"

He was trying bravely to appear hospitable, but his heart was leaden. "N. Painter"—Nell!

The sheriff came on in. There was no answering smile on his face. The other three men passed over the threshold and stood looking curiously at the squatter.

"Thank ye kindly, Reading," said the sheriff. "But it ain't a matter of eats that brung us boys here. Reading, I reckon I'll have to arrest ye fer th' murder of that fella, Painter, that ye was havin' it up an' down with over on th' crick to-day. I certainly hate to do it, son. But I'm bound to say things look bad fer ye—and a sheriff's gotta do his duty."

Twain's lower jaw sagged down. He stood like a man struck between the eyes, wondering whether or not his muscles will keep him on his feet until the brief paralysis has passed.

"What's that?" he croaked feebly at last. "You —you're not talking to me, Sheriff!"

"I sure am," returned the sheriff in a kindly tone. "And I sure hope I'm wrong, Reading. But, by

golly, everything points to you bumping that guy. And—and it's jest naturally gotta be looked into."

Twain sank into a chair beside the table. "Is—is this fellow who called himself Painter dead—actually dead?" he asked, in what he realized to be pure childishness.

"Dead as hell," replied the sheriff, coming farther into the room. "I'll look at yer gat, Reading, if ye don't mind."

"No—not at all. Certainly not," Twain consented absently. "But who killed him, Olcott? I don't understand at all."

The sheriff returned a grunt to this as he stepped to the bedside, climbed upon the bed with one knee, and lifted down the .45 that hung above it.

He pulled the cylinder pin, flopped the cylinder outward, dumped the six big cartridges into his palm. Through the chambers and barrel he squinted at the light.

"Bright and clean," he offered. "When'd ye clean her, Reading?"

"I—I don't remember. I keep it clean, usually. Wait a minute! I cleaned it just last night. Right after supper. I had nothing to do and nothing new to read. I was worried. I cleaned the thing then, Sheriff, to kill time."

"I thought it'd been done some recent," the sheriff answered simply. "No dust in the chambers or the bar'l whatever. It was to-night ye cleaned her, wasn't it?"

"No, last night. I—— For God's sake, man, you don't think I killed that fellow, do you? And

why don't you tell me all about it? Why don't you tell me, damn it! I've got a right to know!"

"Ye have, at that," agreed Olcott, seating himself and crossing his legs. Twain's gun, unloaded, he held in his lap.

"We heard th' shots this afternoon—late. Not so very long ago. We wasn't far from here. I ast th' boys where th' shots had come from. They all said from somewhere clost to where your cabin stands. We worked this way. They was a mighty patch o' chaparral between us an yer crick, and we had trouble gettin' 'round her. Ye know th' place. A hell of a mess. We'd caught up with th' rest o' the posse and forked our hosses. Harder to get here with th' brutes than without 'em. So we made it late.

"Comin' down a little canon t'other side o' Luckybug Crick—ridin' along th' lip of her. Down in th' rocks Lafe Slider see a huddled figger. Crowded in among th' rocks. Two of us gets off and finds a way down in afoot. Th' figger was forty feet below the' lip, where we'd seen it. It was wedged in between two big stones. It had fell in headfirst. What a mess! Been thrown down from th' lip o' th' canon up above, er pushed off, er somethin'. But we dragged 'im out. Two holes in 'im had done th' croakin'. Two holes in his breast. It wasn't th' fall. He'd been heaved off th' lip above after th' shootin'. It was this Painter that filed quartz claims on yer homestead, Reading. That's who th' fella was.

"Then, up above ag'in, we found th' trail where th' body'd been drug along. It was comin' from

this cabin, looked like. We follied her some ways, as far as yer trail from here to Nine Mile. Then it was gittin' too dark to see anythin' more on th' ground. So we jest rode on here to see if ye could tell us anythin' about it. Can ye?"

"No, no!" cried Twain. "Not a thing. I got my horse and rode straight home after you left the camp on the branch creek. I've been here ever since. And I didn't hear any shots, either. Surely you don't think I did this thing, Sheriff? And where is the other man—this fellow's partner, whose voice rumbles in his throat?"

"We don't know that. Some more o' th' boys are huntin' fer 'im. They've gone back to th' camp where you fellas was to-day. They'll drift in soon, if th' man is still there. O' course, maybe he did this killin'. A lot'll depend on th' caliber o' th' bullets when they been dug out. But th' holes in his hide look like forty-fives done th' job, Reading. And that funny-talkin' fella wasn't near yer cabin, was he? That's where th' sounds o' th' shots come from."

"No, of course he wasn't here," Twain said, calmly. "And the shots couldn't have been fired here, for I've been here right along since I came home, and there have been no shots fired. These cañons are peculiar, Sheriff, in the matter of carrying sounds. There are echoes, when the wind's just right. It's confusing. I've noticed it often. The shots that killed this man must have been fired miles from here. Some freakish current of air carried them to you and deceived you."

Twain laughed. "What a devil of a mess!" he

cried. "But of course I can't blame you, Olcott. It's your duty to investigate. I'm willing to be under suspicion. I'll help you all I can, too. But as for me having anything to do with this—knowing anything at all about it——"

"In th' mornin'," Olcott interrupted, in a matter-of-fact tone, "we'll be able to follow th' trail where th' body was dragged and find out more. That trail, though, was pointin' straight this way th' last we see of her. If ye shot this bird here in yer cabin, Reading, and carried 'im off into th' woods afterwards, why didn't ye carry 'im all th' ways? Why drag 'im any?"

"Oh, forget that!" Twain blazed, suddenly angry. "You have no proof whatever that I know anything about this. Suspect me all night, if you feel so disposed. The morning will clear me. I'll try to make you comfortable till then, if you want to stay. And I'll be a passive prisoner, too, if you want it so."

"That man," said the sheriff, in a gloomy voice, "wasn't killed in th' woods. He was killed here in this cabin, Reading, and his body drug into the timber and dumped into that cañon afterwards. O' course, ye mighta had good reason to smoke 'im up. Maybe he come here, got fresh with ye, and threw down on ye first. Then ye shot 'im in self-defense. But ye better tell me th' truth, son. Ye know I'm yer friend. I'm sure ye wouldn't murder a man in cold blood. Come clean, Reading. I'll stand by ye to th' end."

"But, Sheriff, I'm absolutely innocent!" Twain pleaded passionately. "I know nothing at all about this thing."

Sheriff Olcott sighed and lifted a thick forefinger. He pointed it at the wall—at the inside window-frame at the front end of the cabin. This frame, as were the other trimmings of the cabin, had been painted by the owner. There had been a little paint among the belongings of the departing family whose effects he had taken over. With it he had painted the trim of his little shelter inside and out, there not being enough for the adornment of the remainder of the woodwork. The color was light buff.

"What are you pointing at?" Twain puzzled.

"Them red splatters on that yeller window-frame," said Sheriff Olcott morosely. "If ye'd lit th' lamp as soon as ye got back from dumpin' 'im in th' cañon, Reading, maybe ye'd seen them spots an' wiped 'em out. Look at 'em, boys, an' tell me if they're fresh —an' if they look like blood."

Several breathless moments followed, while the three men who had come with Olcott studied the crimson beads that stood out in such sharp contrast to the buff background of the window-frame.

Then said a man:

"They're fresh—wet. And they look like blood."

"Don't touch 'em," ordered Olcott, fixing his gloomy eyes on Twain again.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN OFFER TO BET.

Morning came at last—came slowly from the dissolving night—seemed reticent to come.

Twain Reading had not slept a wink. Sheriff Olcott had slept. His men had slept by turns, rolled in blankets on the floor. The three had guarded the squatter—the prisoner—by four-hour shifts. And now the eastern sky was lighting reluctantly, and another day was near—a day which was to mark the beginning of new and terrible things for Reading.

All night long his tortured mind had dully struggled for an answer to all of these strange problems which had so suddenly confronted it. The man in the woods—the man with the flaring, reddish hair and the negroid nose and lips—was he not N. Painter? He had led Twain to believe that he was —that he had made the locations and erected the monuments which held the notices.

He had told Sheriff Olcott that N. Painter was his name. Yet the note from Old Man Hulette told Twain that Nell Noble, the girl he loved, was N. Painter—that she had located quartz claims on land that she must know was claimed by him. Her father had been present and had backed her up.

There was the nigger in the woodpile! Jerry

Noble, as he had called himself—Jerry Painter—was responsible for that.

Twain realized now that he had considered the man peculiar since first he met him. He was so reserved, so confident of himself, so experienced in matters that a city man is supposed to know nothing about! His gunplay—his Western way of riding! This man knew the outdoor West. He was a mining man. Hulette was right. There was gold on his land, and Painter had discovered it years ago. He had come into the Nancy's Dishpan Country purposely to claim it—and Twain had fallen in love with his daughter.

Then the quarrel over the miserable escape from Folsom Prison. Would Painter have told him about the gold if the quarrel had not come up? Would he have offered him a share—which would be the just and friendly thing to do? Twain doubted it now. Here was a cold-blooded, self-centered man, a conscienceless grabber of what he considered his—a potential killer if crossed. And he had persuaded Nell to side in with him, to sign her own name to the filing notices.

This hurt him most of all. He loved her; he had trusted her; he had thought there could be no selfishness, no malevolence in her. And she had failed him. She had allowed her gold-worshiping, egotistical father to counsel her into betraying the man she had claimed to love.

Ah, well! He had been a fool. He scarcely knew the girl, he remembered now with bitterness. Her physical beauty had swept him off his feet, and, passion-blinded, he had not looked deeper. He would

erase her from his thoughts forever. She was unworthy of his slightest consideration.

Yet he knew that he lied to himself when he thought these things.

The sheriff stirred on the hard board floor. The man seated before the door rubbed his fists in his eyes and yawned sleepily. Twain bent forward on the bed and sat immovable, his fingers clasped before him, his forearms resting on his thighs. The birth of another day was at hand, but Twain Reading did not care. Black night continued to envelop his soul.

One of the sheriff's men cooked breakfast. Twain could not eat when food was set before him. He remained silent. He had nothing to say. Long ago he had ceased to argue, to protest his innocence. His mind was too clouded for coherent speech. He could not account for the crimson stains on the painted window frame. He had not tried to. Some crushing, inexorable, malignant force had seized his life and was showering it with evil. There was no use to protest, to fight back manfully. He didn't care.

"Well, Reading," said the sheriff, as he pushed his chair back from the table in the center of the room, "I guess we'll have to be gettin' under way. I'm mighty sorry, boy, but if ye won't come clean and explain it all, there's nothin' I c'n do but take ye in and lock ye up until they's been a proper investigation. Ye gotta face th' district attorney, and——"

"I'm ready," Twain interrupted petulantly. "Let's go."

As the chairs scraped back, the man at the door

announced that riders were coming into the clearing from the trail.

"Who?" asked the sheriff quickly.

"Don't know, Sheriff," the man replied. "They's two of 'em. Somethin' white across th' breast of one of 'em. Looks like as if his arm was hangin' in a sling. Yes, by golly, that's what it is! And ye may strike me blind if th' other'n ain't a female! It's ridin' straddle, but it's got a female look."

For the first time that morning, Twain Reading showed animation. They were riding to his cabin, Nell and her father! And the hour was early. If they had ridden from Nancy's Dishpan, they must have started at three o'clock. But the point was that they were coming to him—after what had happened! For an instant his heart grew warm. Would they ride to him if—if everything was not all right? An explanation would be forthcoming. Nell hadn't deceived him; she hadn't meant to ruin him. She would explain his doubts away. That was all that mattered. Some way he would manage to clear himself of the accusation of murder that the sheriff had placed against him. That was a trifling matter, compared with his loss of respect for Nell.

At the door the pair dismounted. They talked lengthily with one of the sheriff's men outside.

Then Nell appeared. She paused, undecided, in the doorway, and stood with hands behind her, gazing from Twain to the sheriff and the other two at table.

The sheriff bobbed his head. "Howdy, Miss?" he greeted her. "Did ye want somethin'? Won't ye have a bite to eat?"

Nell's lips were trembling. Her eyes were filled with a swimming mist. She gulped, but could not speak. Then in a brisk little run she reached the side of Twain. She thrust a brown hand into his, looked up into his face with tear-dimmed eyes. But she spoke no word to him. She simply kept her hand in his. And the squatter's heart leaped wildly. She had not deserted him. She would explain when the time had come.

Her father entered the cabin, followed by the curious man with whom he had been speaking before the door. He smiled and bowed to the sheriff. He smiled, too, as he bowed to Reading.

"Good morning, Twain," he said cheerfully. "May Nell and I have some breakfast with you? We've been out the greater part of the night. Some hot coffee would help."

The sheriff, nonplussed, spoke a low word to one of his men, who filled the coffee pot from a bucket and set it on the stove. Noble, or Painter, had seated himself and crossed his legs. Neither he nor Nell, Twain noticed now, were dressed as he was accustomed to see them when riding in the timber.

Nell's father smiled genially at the wondering sheriff. "So N. Painter is dead?" was his surprising opening.

The sheriff blinked his eyes. "Yes, dead," he said.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Sheriff," the stranger continued. "My name is Painter. Jeremy Painter. And this young lady is my daughter, Nelita Painter, more often called Nell. She is the

N. Painter who has located quartz claims on Reading's homestead."

The sheriff's slouching position in the chair changed suddenly. He sat straight and sent a penetrating glance across the table at the smiling man.

"This here young woman is N. Painter, did ye say?" he barked.

Nell's father nodded slowly.

"Then who th' hell's that hog-faced Ike that's jammed in between the rocks at the bottom o' that canon up there?"

"That man," was the assured reply, "is known as Baptist Moxey."

Olcott studied. "Never heard tell of *him*," he said in a childish way at last. "He told me an' th' boys he was N. Painter yistiddy afternoon. Somebody lied—that's sure!"

"Somebody lied," the other agreed.

The sheriff wrinkled his brows. "Why?"

"I can't quite answer that. I'll answer it for you, however, in the course of time. Now, I understand from the gentleman I talked with at the door that you have arrested Twain Reading as under suspicion for the killing of this man."

The sheriff nodded.

"On what evidence, please?"

Olcott repeated what he had told Reading the night before in regard to the opinion of himself and his posse that the sound of the shooting had come from the direction of Twain's cabin. He told of his having overheard the quarrel between Reading and the slain man in the camp on the branch creek. He told of finding the corpse crushed between two

stones at the bottom of the deep cañon. He told of the trail left by the killer when he dragged the body to the lip of the cañon to cast it over. He concluded by dramatically pointing to the dried spots of crimson on the buff frame of the window.

"Purely circumstantial," was the comment of the man with the broken arm.

"Not them blood stains," Olcott contended.

The man who called himself Painter rose to his feet and went over to the window. He examined the stains.

"You don't know, even, that they're blood," he pointed out.

"Analysis will tell," maintained the sheriff doggedly.

"Undoubtedly. You've procured samples?"

"Yes. Last night I took th' bullet out of a ca'tridge with my knife blade. Then I poured out th' powder. I scraped off some o' th' blood, which had dried, and put it in th' ca'tridge case. Then I worked th' bullet back in place to plug it up ag'in."

For emphasis, Olcott took from a vest pocket the cartridge case he had mentioned and set it on the table. His strange interlocutor looked at it for a little, then thoughtfully took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"May I look at it closer?" he asked, returning the handkerchief to his pocket.

"Certainly," agreed the sheriff, but not without a moment's hesitation.

"Yes, I see, on careful examination, that the slug has been prized out," the stranger presently remarked.

He set the cartridge, butt down, before Olcott, who had watched it closely with his keen eyes all the time that it was in the other's hand.

"Rather clever," commented Painter. "Sheriff, I'm something of a gambler. Gambling is my prevailing sin, I guess. Do you indulge to any extent at all?"

"I don't savvy what ye're drivin' at, Mr. Painter —as ye call yerself—nor why ye're drivin' at it; but I reckon I like a little game o' draw as well as th' next man."

"I commend your taste," smiled Painter. "I like draw poker myself. But I'd like to bet you any amount, from a hundred dollars to ten thousand, that the contents of that cartridge case are not blood."

The sheriff looked foxy. "Ye know somethin', I reckon. Ye're a sure-thing gambler, are ye?"

"Not at all. I never set eyes on those spots until you pointed them out to me. But I'm willing to take a chance. Are you?"

"Well, my hundreds don't come as easy as yours do, maybe," returned the sheriff thoughtfully, "and it wouldn't be c'rect for me to bet."

Painter rose to his feet. "You're taking Reading with you?" he asked.

"I gotta. There's no way out of it."

"I think you're making a grave mistake, Sheriff."

"Can't help that"—with a shrug.

"When you leave the cabin, I suppose you'll look for more evidences of the body having been dragged from it into the woods, won't you, Sheriff?"

"I will. It was too dark to folly th' trail any farther last evenin'."

"Then I think you'll find more evidence still against the prisoner. But it will be purely circumstantial. It will be hard to convict him on such evidence. Of course that all depends on the kind of a prosecuting attorney you have, the ability of Reading's attorney, and the degree of dumb-headedness of the jury."

"I reckon th' jury'll be dumb-headed enough," laughed Olcott. "It usually is. But th' prosecutin' attorney's a bear."

"And if my friend Reading is tried in the superior court," said the other, "the defense lawyer will be another bear."

He turned to Twain and held out his hand.

"Sorry to see you in this trouble, old man," he told him. "But we'll be working for you—Nell and I—until you're back on Luckybug Ranch. Which will be quite soon."

Nell's eyes filled with tears. She continued to let her hand rest in Twain's, while her father still held his other hand. There was a strange choking sensation in the squatter's throat. He couldn't understand all this, but he realized that genuine friendship was the basis of it.

"I—I don't know what to say," he faltered. "My mind's in a whirl."

"Everything will be explained in a short time," said the father of the girl he loved.

And, wringing the hand he held, he stepped toward the door.

"Ahem!" the sheriff cleared his throat. "Of

course ye understand, Mr.—er—Painter, that, if ye know anythin' about this case, it's yer duty to tell me."

"What I know and what I can prove are different matters. I wish you all good morning. Come, Nell."

"And where can I find ye if th' district attorney wants to hear what ye think ye know?"

"At Nancy's Dishpan," was the reply. "But I'll keep in touch with the authorities, Sheriff."

"Oh, Daddy!" moaned Nell, as the two rode away side by side. "They won't—they won't find him guilty, will they?"

"Not on any evidence that the sheriff has at present," he reassured her. "You mustn't forget, Daughter, that your father was once a professional gambler. And, though he was a straight gambler, in self-protection it was necessary for him to know all of the tricks of the crooked gambler."

"But I don't understand!"

Luckybug took from his pocket a .45 cartridge and held it up for her to see.

"The dried substance that the sheriff scraped from the window frame is in this," he told her. "While I was studying it as it stood on the table, I reached for my handkerchief, and brought out with it one of my own forty-five cartridges. I palmed the sheriff's when I picked it up after returning my handkerchief to my pocket. He now has one of mine, and the contents can't possibly be analyzed as blood."

"Oh, Daddy!" she cried, aghast. "But isn't that criminal? Isn't it dangerous to tamper with the evidence in a case?"

"I suppose it is," he answered gravely. "But

the whim seized me, and I acted on impulse. I hadn't tried the old trick for years, and I was tempted. I guess I'll never really grow up, Nelita.

"And besides"—his tones were grave—"I was taking no chances on my daughter's future happiness. That happiness can't exist without Twain Reading's freedom. And I know that what's in this cartridge is really blood. I may as well be slaughtered for a sheep as for a lamb, Nell. I belong in the penitentiary, anyway. And so long as you have what I have set my heart on giving you, I care not what happens to me. I'm recklessly tempting fate—but don't forget that they call me Luckybug!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"GOOD LUCK!"

As the sheriff and his posse rode with their prisoner from Luckybug Ranch, they immediately discovered the incriminating trail that had been lost the night before. Not only did the earth show where a heavy body had been dragged along, but blood appeared here and there. They followed it, with eyes fixed on the ground, to the point where they had abandoned it the previous evening.

They continued in the same direction to the cañon on the floor of which lay the crumpled body of Baptist Moxey. With their lariats, they were able to hoist it to the edge above, where they roped it on the back of a snorting horse and proceeded toward the highway.

That portion of the posse that had left the sheriff to search for The Finn had not put in an appearance at Reading's cabin. This meant, the sheriff had determined, that they had been unable to discover the man. He expected to find them waiting for him at the headquarters of the man-hunt, which was a camp half a mile from the paved thoroughfare toward which they moved.

When they reached their destination the sheriff found his men, as expected. They reported that they had come upon the camp of Gus the Finn, but

had found it vacated, with all of the equipment of the two removed.

"He'd have a hard time gettin' away along th' highway," mused the sheriff, "with men strung out along it like we got. He's still in th' timber hereabouts, somewhere. We gotta find 'im. Maybe it was him that done th' killin', after all. That Hottentot, or whatever he was, had good reason to kill 'im, I'd say, from th' way this Painter—if his name was Painter—batted 'im about in camp for nothin'. I'd a heap rather it'd turn out to be him instead o' Reading."

So he dispatched men on a special search for The Finn. Others of the party he directed to continue the systematic man-hunt for the escaped convict. And he sent his chief deputy, with two others, in an automobile to the county seat with Reading. The chief deputy carried the cartridge that Olcott had given him, which was supposed to contain the blood, and which was to be handed to the district attorney immediately upon arrival. The body of the slain man was taken, too, to be turned over to the coroner.

So before noon Twain Reading was lodged in the county jail, where he paced back and forth the length of his cell and wondered dully when and where the next stunning blow would strike.

It was two days after he had been confined that he was taken out by a deputy sheriff for the inquest.

The inquest was held in the undertaking establishment of the county coroner, and there were about thirty people present, exclusive of the jury.

When the deputy conducted him, handcuffed, into the room, he looked about swiftly for Nell and her

father. But they were not present. The sheriff, who came in toward the end of the proceedings, stated on the witness stand that he had been unable to locate them.

Sheriff John Olcott was the main witness. He told his story succinctly. One by one other witnesses were called, including the members of the sheriff's posse who had been with him in Twain's cabin, and the medical man who had examined the body. At last came the expert to whom the district attorney had given the cartridge supposed to contain particles of dried human blood.

The testimony of this man created considerable stir, for he had little to say beyond the bare statement that the cartridge intrusted to him had contained powder and nothing more. Sheriff Olcott forgot himself and shot a question at him, without asking the coroner's permission.

"Powder?" he bawled. "How could it have contained powder? I'd poured the powder out!"

The expert shrugged his shoulders as the coroner indicated by a nod that he might answer Olcott.

"I'm positive," he said, "that the cartridge given me by the district attorney had not been tampered with since it left the factory. There were no evidences whatever that the bullet had been prized out."

"But——"

One of the sheriff's deputies leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"But I couldn't 'a' got her mixed with th' good ca'tridges in my belt!" the sheriff protested aloud to him. "They was in my belt, wasn't they? And I carried this here ca'tridge that had th' blood in

it in my vest pocket. There's somethin' wrong! Some funny work here, by golly!"

The deputy whispered to him again, and the sheriff nodded thoughtfully. Then he asked permission to address the jury. The expert left the stand and the sheriff took his place.

He repeated the tale of his encounter with Luckybug in Reading's cabin. Again he told of the queer statements of this man who claimed to be Jeremy Painter, father of N. Painter, who, he alleged, was his daughter Nell. He reminded the jurymen that the dead man had called himself Painter. Then he told of his having allowed the cartridge to pass into the strange man's hands for an instant.

"Gentlemen," he concluded, "that bird gypped me right then. He slipped me a good ca'tridge instead o' th' one that had th' blood in her. That's what he done. He tampered with evidence in a criminal case, which was in th' hands of an authorized representative o' th' law. That's a mighty serious offense."

The jury nodded gravely.

"Why, Sheriff Olcott, did you allow this piece of evidence to leave your hands?" the coroner asked.

"She was settin' on th' table," Olcott replied. "He jest naturally picked it up to examine it. I thought I was watchin' it all th' time it was in his hands. But I guess th' hand deceives th' eye, as th' magicians say on th' stage."

"Didn't you protest when he reached for it?"

"Well—no, sir; I reckon I didn't."

"And this man picked it up without asking permission, even?"

The sheriff's bronzed face fired up at this. "Mr. Coroner," he said, "ye've known me fer twenty years and over. I hope ye ain't contracted th' belief in them twenty years that I'm a plain dam' fool. But he *did* ask permission to look at her, and damned if I didn't let 'im go ahead."

"Why, Sheriff?"

Olcott seemed to be studying over his answer. "There was something about that fella," he replied finally, "that made ye do what he asked, without question. He's one o' these here masterful fellas, Mr. Coroner. He don't bluff ye, and he don't ask fer favors, and he don't make ye suspicion him at all. And when he asked me if he could examine that there ca'tridge I let 'im do it, jest as if like th' judge o' th' superior court had asked me. I did hesitate a little when he says: 'Can I have a look at her?'—or somethin' like that. But I looked into his eyes and said 'Yes' before I knowed I'd said it. His mouth says, 'Can I have a look at her?'—but his eyes said, 'I'm goin' to.' And I jest didn't have th' guts to tell 'im no. I ain't usually thataway, either. Doggoneit, anyway!"

The jury laughed at the sheriffs perplexed face.

They eventually reached a verdict which was in no way an indictment against Twain Reading, and Twain was led back to his cell.

Nearly two weeks passed after this, and then one day he was led out for a preliminary hearing before a justice of the peace.

The sheriff was still unable, he stated, to lay hands upon the man who claimed to be Painter and his daughter. The apprehension of the campmate of

the slain man, Gus the Finn, was likewise beyond the sheriff's power. But the sheriff had something new to disclose, nevertheless.

He had returned, with witnesses, to Reading's cabin immediately after the coroner's inquest. His object had been to scrape off more of the dried crimson beads on the painted window frame. He had intended to be sure, this time, that the samples found their way into the district attorney's and the expert's hands.

But he had found the window frame entirely clean of stains, and was positive in his own mind that the paintwork had been thoroughly scrubbed.

But the evidence of the marks left by the body having been dragged over Reading's trail, coupled with that of the quarrel between the dead man and the squatter in the former's camp, were considered sufficient grounds by the justice for binding Reading over to the superior court to be tried on the charge of murder.

Twain left the court room more deeply concerned than he had been since his arrest. He had fully expected to be exonerated by the coroner's jury. Again, he had expected the justice's court to consider the evidence against him too superficial for him to be bound over to the higher tribunal. He realized now, though, that nobody who had listened to his story—which, in reality, was no story at all—had believed in him. He had read accusation in the eyes of everybody. He was stunned as he slowly reentered his gloomy cell and seated himself on a bench. Why, they were going to try him for murder! Him! Twain Reading! It seemed incredible.

And what was he to do? He had no money to employ efficient counsel. He would ask the court's permission to plead his own case, of course, explaining that he was a graduate of a well-known college of law, and had been admitted to practice at the bar. But he couldn't plead his own case! There was no case to plead. He knew less about these strange proceedings, it seemed, than his accusers.

What had become of Nell? Why couldn't the sheriff locate her and her father? Had they left the country? Could it be possible that Painter himself had killed this man? Who had erased the red stains from the painted window frame? How had they come there?

None of these perplexing questions could he answer. For three days more he paced the length and breadth of his narrow cell with his fingers twining and untwining themselves behind his back. Then, on the fourth morning, the deputy sheriff who watched over him told him that his trial had been set for an early date, one week from that very day.

He resumed his pacing back and forth. He was worried, distraught. He began to realize that perhaps Nell's father had been right when he maintained that there were many men behind prison bars who were entitled to freedom. Why, he would be one of these, perhaps! It all depended on the mental character of the jury. And he had done nothing —absolutely nothing! He was as innocent as a baby in its cradle of the crime of which he had been accused.

And how had the red scrapings vanished from

the cartridge into which Sheriff Alcott had dropped them? Was it possible that the sheriff had been right—that Nell's father had switched cartridges on him? Where had he gotten the good cartridge, if this was so? He had been dressed in such clothes as a city man wears. Usually, when riding through the woods, he dressed like a *vaquero,* and carried a forty-five and cartridge belt. But no gun was in sight when he had come that day. Was he carrying a concealed weapon? Did that account for extra cartridges which might have been loose in his pocket? But why should he carry a revolver when, to all appearances, he had just come from Sacramento, where, probably, he had gone with Nell to make filings on the claims?

It was the day before his trial that the deputy shoved a letter to him through the bars. The envelope had been slit; the letter, presumably, read.

There was no signature attached to the brief note that he found inclosed. In fact, there was nothing but the typewritten body of the note itself. The postmark on the envelope, however, was Sacramento, California, and the date the day preceding.

He read:

Don't worry about an attorney to defend your case. One will be on hand to-morrow, and there will be no need to consult with him before your trial begins. Good luck!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TRIAL.

All of the first morning and all of the second were taken up with the task of selecting a jury. There was a brisk little attorney who wrung Twain's hand and grinned good-naturedly when the prisoner was conducted beyond the railing in the court room.

"My name is Hurley," he said. "Arrangements have been made for me to handle your case and look out for your best interests in the matter of selecting a jury. I shall be assistant to the regular attorney who has been retained by friends of yours to defend you, but who will probably not arrive until late to-morrow night. However, that will be in plenty of time. It'll require some time to get a jury to suit me in a case like this, where the evidence is all of such a circumstantial nature. Don't worry, Mr. Reading. We're going to knock 'em dead before this thing is over."

And with that he bustled away to his seat, as the dull business of calling the roll of empaneled men and women began.

The two sessions dragged out their weary course, and the twelve jurywomen and jurymen were at last accepted. Then there was nothing to be done but to wait for another day and the opening of the trial proper.

When Twain was led into the crowded court room

on that momentous morning the deputy sheriff seated him beyond the railing, the center of many curious eyes. He glanced up at the empty bench—for the judge had not yet entered the court room—and dully studied the backs or faces of the several men before the bar. He caught the eye of Attorney Hurley, who smiled at him over his shoulder, but did not leave the side of a man who was bending over a table with him.

This man's back was toward the prisoner. It was a broad back, covered with creaseless gray cloth. There seemed to be something familiar about that back, but Twain's searching eyes were elsewhere when the owner of it finally stood erect and turned about. Hurley nodded toward the prisoner, and the man, an enormous fellow, with iron-gray hair and a close-cropped, iron-gray mustache, a perfectly dressed man with piercing gray eyes and a consequential mein, stepped briskly across the carpeted floor.

He laid a big, white hand on Twain's shoulder, and Twain started nervously at the unexpected touch and looked around.

"Well, my boy," came the man's resonant but modulated voice, "I've come all the way from Massachusetts to see that they don't hang anything onto you out here."

Twain Reading's lower jaw sagged down and his blue eyes grew round with wonder.

"Uncle Sam!" he gasped. "Uncle Sam Reading!"

"Yes, Uncle Sam," returned the other. "And by the courtesy of the Appellate Court my application has been speeded up and I have been admitted to

practice in the State of California—simply to get you out of this mess. And I may add that there is more country between here and Boston than I was aware that the entire world contained. I'm glad to —er—see you looking so well, Twain. Why don't you offer me your hand, confound it!"

Twain grinned sheepishly and stood upon his feet. He held out his tardy hand, and the gray man gripped it.

"You unbelievable young ass!" growled Uncle Sam. "If you'd stayed in Boston instead of getting lost in this abominable land of spaces you'd not be in this infernal fix. You'd now be a prominent attorney, a man of means, position, and consequence. And what *are* you, because of your bullheadedness? A penniless homesteader—and on trial for your life for the murder of a tramp! It's a wonder I consented to come. I ought to let you hang, by George! And it's doubtful if even my unbounded affection for your mother would have brought me here if that confounded man who calls himself Luckybug hadn't forced his inescapable personality on me! He's fascinating—hypnotic. And I have some little reputation along those lines myself."

"Luckybug!" puzzled Twain. "Why, that's the name of my ranch and my creek! I don't——"

"No, you don't!" interrupted the other crossly. "You don't know anything. Luckybug is also the name of your gold mine and of your father-in-law to be, if all that I've heard is true. Luckybug is the man whom you knew as Noble, and later as Painter. He's the father of the girl you're going to marry, if I have anything to say about it."

"Luckybug!" puzzled Twain. "The girl I'm going to marry! Where—where did you meet this—this Luckybug, Uncle Sam?"

"In Boston, of course. He went back there to get me to come out here and defend your case. And damn me if he didn't succeed!"

"How—how did he know I had an Uncle Sam Reading in Boston?" marveled Twain.

"Damn it, don't you suppose the most prominent criminal lawyer in New England is in *Who's Who?* The man's not a fool! He finds out what he wants to know. Looking your family up, by golly, to see if you came of stock fit to graft his daughter onto! The nerve of him! But I can't blame him one bit. The only sensible thing you've done in the past eighteen months, Twain Reading, is to fall in love with that girl."

"But why didn't you come to see me in jail, Uncle Sam?"

"Got in only last night. Arranged everything by wire beforehand, through our representatives here. But so-long, now. Here comes the judge. Just sit tight and watch your Uncle Sam at work. I'll tell you more after the trial. Maybe you'll like it; maybe you won't."

The trial began. When the prosecuting attorney had finished his address to the jury, he first called Sheriff Olcott to the witness stand. Olcott was duly sworn, and proceeded in his blunt, concise manner to reveal all that he knew about the case. He did not neglect to mention the episode concerning the failure of the cartridge case to contain dried blood instead of powder.

The prosecuting attorney then questioned him briefly. When he concluded, Sam Reading whispered into the ear of his colleague, and the young attorney immediately waived the privilege of the defense of cross-questioning the witness.

One by one, the members of the sheriff's posse who had been with him when the body was discovered were placed on the stand. All told substantially the same story as the sheriff's. In each case Hurley, apparently advised to do so by Twain's uncle, declined to cross-question these witnesses.

Then came the turn of the defense. For the first time Sam Reading rose to his feet and spoke. There was a pronounced stir among the spectators, for the secret had leaked out that a distinguished criminal lawyer from Boston, none other than the prisoner's uncle, had come all the way to California to defend his brother's son.

"Your Honor," came the deep, resonant tones of the veteran, "we desire to call but two witnesses to the stand. They have not been duly subpœnaed, but we ask permission of the court that they be sworn, nevertheless, and allowed to tell the truth about this matter."

The court's permission being granted, Sam Reading spoke a name to the clerk, who called.

"Mr. Jeremy Painter."

Then Luckybug, with his arm still in a sling, rose from his seat beside Nell and walked down the aisle. The gate was opened for him and he stepped upon the stand and held up his right hand to be sworn. He seated himself amid a breathless silence.

Sam Reading stepped toward him.

"Your name is Jeremy Painter?"

"Yes, sir," replied the witness.

"Where is your place of residence, Mr. Painter?"

"At present I am living, off and on, with my daughter at the ranch called Nancy's Dishpan."

"What is your occupation, please, Mr. Painter?"

"At present I am unoccupied, except that I am cooperating with my daughter in making preparations for the development of gold claims which she recently located on Luckybug Creek."

"And before that?"

"For the eighteen months or more previous to the locating of the claims, I was traveling with my daughter in South America and Europe."

"And what was your occupation before starting on that trip?"

"I owned and operated in Puerta de Luna, Mexico, a resort and hotel known as The Luckybug."

"You have a pseudonym, sobriquet, or nickname, haven't you, Mr. Painter?"

"Yes, sir. For many years in Mexico I was known simply as Luckybug."

"Do you know the prisoner before the bar?"

"I do."

"Tell me, please, whether or not the mining claims located by your daughter are situated on land claimed by the prisoner as a homestead."

"They are."

"And what, please, is the name by which this homestead is generally known?"

"Luckybug Ranch," was the immediate reply.

The spectators here became deeply interested. Gold claims on Luckybug Creek; the nickname

Luckybug; a resort in Mexico known as The Luckybug; Luckybug Ranch!

But Sam Reading was not yet through with Luckybugs. "Mr. Painter," he asked, "what title was used in posting the notices of location and in recording the filings on your daughter's gold claims?"

"The Luckybug Mines Company," came the answer.

"And if the mines develop according to your expectations, under what name will they be known?"

"The Luckybug Lode."

Somebody laughed, and the gavel rapped for order.

"Mr. Painter," continued Twain's uncle, "will you oblige me by telling the jury everything that you know about the case which is being tried before this court to-day? Kindly address your remarks to the jury, will you?"

And, with this, Sam Reading resumed his seat beside his colleague.

In compliance, Luckybug turned his chair slightly, so that he faced the jurors. His tones were low as he spoke, but so quiet was the court room that no one missed a single word of what he had to say. And there was small wonder concerning this silence, for Luckybug began:

"For about thirteen years I have been an escaped convict from Folsom Penitentiary."

This was followed, however, by a slight interruption; for from the throat of Nell there came a low, inarticulate cry, and she hid her face in her handkerchief and began to sob. Necks were craned her way,

but her father was speaking again; and the mere sobbing of a wretched girl could not distract attention from the fascinating disclosures of the witness.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

LUCKYBUG SPEAKS.

The story that Luckybug told the members of the jury was virtually the story of his life. He told it briskly, unfalteringly, and the listeners hung upon every word in rapt attention. Even the judge listened, fascinated, as if he were hearing a play. But to Twain Reading the story that he heard seemed like a dream.

Luckybug dwelt upon the plot to hound him into paying hush money concocted by Baptist Moxey and Kenelm Laplace.

And now the tale was swiftly drawing to a close. Luckybug had told of his encounter with Laplace in the hotel suite in Sacramento. He told how, after Laplace had left them, Nell and he had made haste to leave the hotel and drive back to the Dishpan Country in their car, in an effort to get on Laplace's trail and follow him to Baptist Moxey, whom they believed to be hiding in the woods close to the Luckybug Lode.

Not far out of Sacramento they had had reason to believe that a little runabout speeding ahead of them along the highway was being driven by Laplace. So Nell had regulated the speed of their car according to that of the car ahead, and they had managed to keep it in sight for the greater part of the trip.

Then, just before they reached Nine Mile, they

saw the runabout parked in the trees beside the road. They ran their own car into the timber farther on, and hurried on foot down Reading's trail, in what they hoped were the tracks of the man they wished to spy upon.

Suddenly they heard voices ahead of them on the trail, and they came to a halt and hid themselves in the trees. Presently Luckybug crept forward and saw Laplace and the man with the reddish hair whom he knew as Baptist Moxey. He waited, hidden by the brush and leaves, until Laplace and Moxey sought out a secluded spot away from the trail in which to continue their planning.

Now Luckybug, creeping on hands and knees with difficulty because of his broken arm, drew close to the pair and secreted himself behind the trunk of a spruce, close enough to hear every word of the conversation that passed between them. And presently he was startled by a touch on his arm. Nell, still able to hear the voices from where she had been waiting, had become worried and curious, and had come up behind her father and seen him hiding there.

She stood behind him. Both were able to overhear the conversation between Laplace and Moxey when they spoke in ordinary tones; and when the pair began to quarrel their voices rose until their words might have been distinguished from quite a distance.

Luckybug told the jury all that had passed between the two, and then of the sudden and unexpected shooting which had wiped Baptist Moxey out of the plot forever.

"Laplace was frightened," the witness said. "I am positive that he scarcely knew that he had shot the man twice until he saw him struggling in his death throes on the ground. I was on the point of stepping forward and covering him with my forty-five, which I have carried everywhere I went since I encountered Laplace at Nancy's Dishpan. He had ruined his own plot against me. I was an escaped jailbird, but he had made himself a killer; and the doors of the penitentiary were hungry for both of us.

"But my daughter held my arm and in a whisper cautioned me to wait. She cannot explain why she did so, even now. But some feminine intuition warned her that our interests would be benefited if we watched what Laplace would do next.

"At first he ran away, when he gained full realization of what he had done. But he didn't run far. He didn't even get out of sight. A plan was born almost instantaneously in his mind, and he came back swiftly.

"He bent over Moxey and did his best to stanch the flow of blood. Then with great difficulty, for Moxey was a heavy man, he got the body on his back and staggered with it through the trees.

"When he disappeared we followed, keeping under cover carefully. He shoved and dragged and pulled until the dead man was lying in the trail to Nine Mile. Then he redoubled his efforts to stop the flowing of the blood. And once more he got under his burden and shuffled with it along the trail toward Reading's homestead.

"Dusk was close at hand. We had started late

from Sacramento, and the trip is a long one. The trail from Reading's homestead to Nine Mile Post Office is a long one, too, and considerable time had been spent on it.

"My daughter and I followed Laplace down the trail toward Luckybug Ranch. Both of us realized, now, what the killer had in mind. Sure enough, when he reached the spot where the trail leaves the open portion of the homestead and plunges into the timber, Laplace came to rest and eased the body to the ground. Trees hid him from Reading's cabin.

"My daughter and I secreted ourselves again and waited. Laplace sat on a down tree, gasping for breath and mopping his brow with his handkerchief. He was about all in. But there was before him a greater task still.

"He went at it as soon as his wind and strength returned. He removed from the bullet wuonds the pieces of cloth that he had torn from his shirt and had used to retard the flow of blood. For it was now his plan to allow the body to drip and leave blood-stains on the trail as he dragged it back the way he had come.

"This was a herculean task for him, for he isn't accustomed to hard work, I imagine. But he was desperate, and desperation lent him strength. He managed, but not without many stops, to drag the body up the trail from the opening of it to where it crosses a small, deep cañon. Here he left the trail and dragged the body along the cañon's lip. It was almost dark when he came to a halt at last, rested briefly, and then pushed the body over the edge to the rock-strewn floor below.

"My daughter Nelita and I had seen, after trying to follow Laplace when he left the trail, that it would be poor policy to do so. There were few trees on that slope of the hillside, and the chaparral, even, was straggling. Laplace would return the way he had come, after disposing of the body, we believed. And there was no place for us to hide if we followed him.

"So we turned back at once, hurried across the cañon on the bridge that has been thrown over it, and followed the course of Laplace on the other side, where the forest is deeper and the undercover thick. We traveled much faster than he did, of course. We knew about the deep place in that cañon, for we had scoured the country pretty thoroughly in our search for the lost lode. We had already surmised that he would dispose of the body there. And we were at the scene ahead of him, but on the opposite side of the cañon, when he arrived with the body and heaved it over the edge.

"Then, to our complete surprise, he started running, as if the fiends of darkness were after him. And he didn't run back the way he had come. He continued on up the cañon, following the northern rim of it, and we lost him completely, since we had no way of getting across except to go back to the down trees that bridge the trail.

"So we returned to the highway and spent the night at Nine Mile. Next morning we hired horses and rode to Luckybug Ranch, with the idea of telling Twain Reading all about the gold claims, offering him a partnership in the venture, and disclosing what Kenelm Laplace had done to throw suspicion on him.

But when we arrived there, at an early hour, we found that the sheriff and his men had arrested Reading, and had stayed at his cabin all night.

"Then, making use of an old trick in prestidigitation which I have known for years, I took one of my own forty-five cartridges from my pocket, and, after examining the cartridge into which the sheriff had dropped samples of the blood found on the window frame, I switched on him. That, then, accounts for the absence of the samples in the cartridge that the expert examined."

"Just a moment, please," interposed Sam Reading. "Why did you do that, Mr. Painter? Didn't you realize that you were taking the risk of laying yourself liable to criminal prosecution for tempering with evidence already in the custody of an authorized representative of the law?"

The judge and the prosecuting attorney stared at Twain's Uncle Sam. Was the man trying to discredit his own witness in the jury's eyes?

"Oh, yes, I realized all that," Luckybug returned. "But I was taking no chances. I believed that the dried red beads on the painted frame were actually blood. How they came to be there, I couldn't imagine. Reading might have cut himself—something like that. I wanted time to think and investigate. And I didn't want samples of human blood to appear as evidence at this trial. I know what circumstantial evidence and an intolerant judge did for me.

"That same day, after Reading had been taken away, my daughter and I rode back. We managed to get into the cabin through a window. We investigated the red drops. Then we scraped them from

the window frame. That was before I had had time to take the sample in the sheriff's cartridge to an expert. I did this later. It is the blood of a newly slaughtered beef."

A murmur ran through the court room.

"And how do you account for the beef blood being on the window frame?" asked Twain's uncle.

The prosecuting attorney here hopped to his feet and raised speedy objection. The witness was not an authorized investigator, and how he accounted for this and that had no bearing whatever on the case. Sam Reading merely smiled at him. He knew that judges were human. He believed that the judge before whom this case was being tried would be consumed with curiosity if he did not find out how beef blood came to be spattered on that window frame. He smiled again as the objection was overruled and the witness commanded to proceed.

"In Reading's screened cupboard, outside the cabin," Luckybug explained, "I found a sizeable piece of fresh beef. It was very fresh indeed—almost dripping blood. I learned afterward that it had been sent to Reading as a present that same day by the wife of Edwin Hulette, of Nancy's Dishpan.

"Still, my daughter and I were at a loss to account for the blood being on the window frame. The kitchen table, on which Reading was accustomed to prepare his food for cooking, stood, as usual, at least ten feet from that window.

"But in a saucer in the same cupboard outside we finally centered our attention on the remains of a hamburger sandwich, with one large bite taken out

of it. Reading, apparently, had been stuffing himself on hamburger sandwiches, made from this green meat, but had stalled on the last one. So, still trying to ferret out the secret of those stains on the window frame, we went back into the cabin and found the little food chopper in which Reading had ground his meat to make those sandwiches. We screwed it fast to the table, and cut off chunks of the fresh meat. Then my daughter Nell began to grind it. And she had not taken a dozen turns when the blood squirted from the grinder as her fingers forced the meat into it, and splattered the window frame ten feet away from the table.

"That answered our question, so we prepared a solution of soap and water and wiped the window frame clean of every stain."

Luckybug paused and looked at Sam Reading.

"Once again," said the attorney, "you were destroying evidence, weren't you, Mr. Painter?"

"I was, perhaps," Luckybug replied. "But the evidence I now knew to be beef blood, and that would have helped to clear Twain Reading."

"But you switched cartridges on the sheriff, in order to keep this same evidence from being exhibited at the trial!" cried the lawyer.

"At that time," Luckybug returned, "I thought that it might be human blood. And that if it was found to be that, it might aid materially in sending Twain Reading to the gallows or the pen."

"And then, when you discovered that it was only the blood of a beef, you wiped it out so that the sheriff, when he returned for another sample, would not be able to find the beef blood, which might have

helped in clearing your friend of the charge of murder. Such antagonistic actions require an explanation, Mr. Painter."

"The explanation is simple," Luckybug told him. "I didn't want Twain Reading to be found guilty of murder. But I did want him to languish in jail for a time, and see the gates of the penitentiary yawning before him, so that he would be brought to realize fully that there may be many a man behind the bars who is innocent. I wanted him to see the fallacy of circumstantial evidence. I wanted him to know for a surety how an innocent man can be sent to the pen. I meant to clear him at the last moment, of course, by my testimony on the witness stand. If mine would not be accepted because I am an escaped convict, I knew that my daughter's would be. But I didn't want the evidence of the beef blood to clear Reading at the coroner's inquest or at his preliminary hearing. I wanted him to suffer something of what I have suffered. Because he wanted to marry my daughter, and my daughter wants to marry him. If he had refused to marry her, after learning that her father is an escaped convict, I would have had to kill him. And that wouldn't have been nice. I wanted to scare a little humanity and tolerance into him."

Sam Reading stepped closer to the witness and the jury. Over and over in his white fingers he turned a gold pencil. The judge, the jurors, everybody in the room watched him, wondering what strange disclosures his next question would bring out.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE SECOND WITNESS.

"Mr. Painter," asked Reading's Uncle Sam, "where have you been since the date of the killing?"

"In the country hereabout, on my way to Boston to persuade you to come West and defend your nephew, in Boston for a time, and en route back here."

"Didn't you realize that it was unnecessary to bring me out here to clear my nephew? Wouldn't the testimony of yourself and daughter accomplish that almost without the need of counsel?"

"I wanted to scare you into thinking that your nephew was in desperate need of your expert help," Luckybug replied. "I didn't tell you all of the particulars until you reached California, last night. I did this purely to bring Twain Reading in touch with his family again and patch up the breach that came when he left your law offices in Boston, because of his extreme intolerance of humanity, and came West to be a cowboy. I was afraid that you wouldn't consent to come if I told you everything back there."

"M'm-m!" Sam Reading muttered through his mustache.

The district attorney tried once more to stop what he considered irrelevant testimony, but the judge, apparently, was being entertained. It was not often that he had before the bench an attorney of the caliber of Sam Reading. He was interested in

finding out how at least one big criminal lawyer had gained his enviable reputation.

"Mr. Painter," Reading continued, "do you realize the gravity of the confessions you have made under oath to-day?"

"I do," said Luckybug.

"Do you realize that, the moment you leave this court room, the sheriff of this county will place you under arrest as an escaped convict from the penitentiary?"

"I do."

"Then why have you taken this momentous step?"

"To save my friend, Twain Reading, from suffering as I suffered. To let him know that an escaped prisoner may have a heart and be a man well worth knowing—a man worthy to be the father of the girl he loves. And, again, I did it because of my daughter. She could not be happy without Reading's love, and it is my one aim in life to make her happy. I would not have had her marry Reading and keep her father's past a secret from him. So I recklessly, deliberately, have done what I have done for her sake and his. I consider myself nothing but a victim of fate. I am ready for whatever the future may hold in store for me. I have done my best, and if I have failed I have failed. That book is closed."

"That will be all, Mr. Painter," said Sam Reading in a low voice. Then he faced the court. "Your Honor," he said, "we invite cross-examination by the prosecution."

But the district attorney shook his head.

Then the name of the second witness for the de-

fense was called, and Nelita Painter, her eyes now dry and her lips set firmly, took the chair vacated by her father.

The defense attorney's questioning of her was decidedly brief. He asked brisk questions, born of the story told by Luckybug, which brought out answers substantiating the latter portion of her father's testimony. He concluded in rapid-fire manner:

"Did you go to Boston with your father, Miss Painter?"

"I did," she answered.

"And before that, were you with your father when he was hunting for Kenelm Laplace, in order to bring him to trial for the killing of Baptist Moxey?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did your father tell you, in explanation of his actions in not informing the sheriff that you two knew who had killed Moxey, that he considered himself better able to capture Laplace than the sheriff or his men?"

"Yes, sir, he told me that."

"And also that Laplace, not knowing that the slaying had been witnessed by anybody, would consider himself safe and would make a lone attempt to threaten your father into paying him hush money?"

"My father told me that."

"And did Laplace finally make such an attempt?"

"He did."

"And what was the outcome of that meeting, Miss Painter?"

"My father and I planned to drive along the road in our car, close to Nancy's Dishpan," the girl

replied. "We had done so several times. You see, we had overheard Moxey's plan in the woods, and thought that, now that he was obliged to act alone, Laplace might follow it. So we were laying a trap for him. Yesterday afternoon he stepped out and confronted us, and in his hand was an automatic pistol. He ordered me to stop the car and throw up my hands. And he ordered my father to throw up his good hand, too."

"Did you do so?"

"Yes."

"And your father, also?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then what happened, please?"

"Why, I heard a sudden explosion right beside me, and saw Mr. Laplace spinning around in the road. Then Daddy got out of the car, took Mr. Laplace's gun away from him, and told me to help him in. We got him in and brought him here last night. He wasn't hurt badly. Daddy had only shot off one of his ears."

"Do you know where Laplace is now, Miss Painter?"

"Yes, sir. The undersheriff to whom Daddy handed him over this morning, after he'd kept him tied up in our rooms at the hotel last night, brought him in a few minutes ago."

The spectators craned their necks and their eyes popped as the undersheriff mentioned came down the aisle with his prisoner, about whose head was bound a bandage.

Sam Reading nodded to Nell, who started to leave

the witness stand. And at the same time Reading spoke:

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said, "I demand that, when you retire, you immediately return and bring in a verdict of not guilty. Your Honor, we rest our case."

The judge cleared his throat. "Mr. Reading," he said, "it seems to me that you have introduced into this trial a series of proceedings which are highly irregular."

"I have done just that, Your Honor," returned Twain's uncle. "But it strikes me as a highly irregular case, from beginning to end. And there is no doubt in my mind but that everybody, including Your Honor, has been entertained thereby. And, with Your Honor's permission, I should like now to make this entertainment more dramatic still. I wish to announce to the court and all present—particularly the sheriff—that the man known as Luckybug was pardoned over thirteen years ago by the governor of this State. He was pardoned four days before he escaped from the prison camp."

Amid the vast silence the judge said: "But doubtless that pardon has long since been revoked, Mr. Reading."

"The strange part of it is, Your Honor, that the pardon has not been revoked. When Luckybug's daughter was taken East by the relatives of her stepfather, these good people secretly began an attempt to influence the governor of California in her father's behalf. They did not tell the child for fear of raising hopes which might never be realized. They were people of some influence at home, and they brought

this influence to bear out here through the medium of friends. But for several years, or until the daughter had grown almost to young womanhood, their efforts in her father's behalf were fruitless.

"Then the man whom Luckybug held up at Sontag, in a foolish, boyish attempt to get back the money that had been stolen from him, confessed on his deathbed that he had previously held up the youngster that same night and taken his all. This confession was brought to the governor's attention by no less a person than Jimmy Keister, of Sontag, the step-father of Nell. This was after the death of her relatives in the East. And the governor decided to pardon Number Seven Thousand Eight Hundred and Nine.

"The pardon was forwarded to the clerk of the prison board. But there was a miscarriage by reason of the clerk's having been called away to the sickbed of his father, and for four days the pardon was kept from the prisoner, out in the road camp. He had escaped before the clerk of the prison board returned to his duties at the penitentiary.

"So the governor did not revoke the pardon, but let it stand. That precious piece of paper, together with a new suit of clothes and five dollars in cash, are waiting for Number Seven Eight O Nine to-day.

"I know all this because I visited the governor in the State capital last night. I went to him to see what might be done for Luckybug, a man who has impressed me greatly, and learned this surprising thing. The governor sent a special messenger in an automobile to the penitentiary for the ancient data on the case. It was brought to him, together

with the pardon, now yellow with the years. And the governor promised me then that this pardon would stand.

"I may have brought some influence to bear on him, I will admit. He was one of the worst young cut-ups imaginable when he and I studied law in the same institution back East so many years ago that I decline to mention the number. If his wife should learn of some of these youthful pranks—— But, anyway, the governor and I had a great time recalling the dear old days—and Jeremy Painter's pardon stands. That alone, Your Honor, was worth my trip to California, and I seriously trust that, in telling this, or in my brazen and extraordinary handling of this case, I have cast no aspersion upon the dignity of this court."

There was a mumble of voices, then a piercing scream. And Nell Painter's arms were about her father, while the tears streamed unheeded down her cheeks.

And now Twain Reading was running toward them, leaping the gate of the sacred space before the bench. The crowd stood back. With a cry he threw his arms about them both. Then everybody cheered, and the frenzied hammering of the gavel was in vain.

While out in the freight yards a flabby-faced, pigeon-breasted man, who mumbled brokenly to himself and mouthed his words, stole along like a dog that has lost its master, and hid himself in a boxcar of a moving train. Gus the Finn was alone in the world again, and he shrank from the unknown future that lay before him.

And slowly toward the divide of the high Sierra a lean, hungry, hunted figure made his cautious way toward the Eastern boundary of California—the convict to whom Luckybug had given the doubtful joys of freedom.

THE END.